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THE HOUSE OF RIMMON.

THE HOUSE OF RIMMON:

A Black Country Story.

BY

JEANIE GWYNNE BETTANY.

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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Dedicated

TO MY VERY KIND FRIENDS,

MR. JOHN SAUNDERS,

AND

MR. WALTER BESANT.

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THE HOUSE OF RIMMON.

CHAPTER I.

WARNING NOTES.



It was August, about sixteen months after the events last narrated, and Mr. Thomas Hackbit was comfortably seated at his breakfast-table, which was spread in no mean style. He had his

newspaper, and was on the whole very complacent.

Our little friend Kizzy, in a fresh morning print, had on her face that subdued and tender look which comes sometimes with motherhood. The sweet face, though a thought too grave, was, nevertheless, as

irresistible as in former days. The patient pathos of the eyes was in fact a new and all-powerful charm. A woman whose face compels compassion, above all a beautiful woman—is she not the most attractive creature on earth?

This look of endurance on Kizzy's face, however, was no attraction to her husband, knowing as he did the cause. It was not pleasant to him that this woman always behaved faultlessly, yet did everything as a penance. Why did she not fly out, as she would have done in the old days, and rain scorn upon him, nay box his ears? He would have liked that. Had the poor child tried to be aggravating, she could not have succeeded better.

“I say, Kizzy,” remarked Hackbit, looking up from his paper, “what do you want to parade yourself as a saint for? I wanted a wife, not a sister of mercy; and at all hours of the day, or night, for that matter, you are off to somebody's sick child, or to a burnt collier, or to the Lord knows who. Once for all, I don't like it.”

A little of the old fire flashed in the girl's face, as she said a trifle sharply, “Do you wish

to stop what helps to make me a good wife to you?"

"That's just it," responded the solicitor wrathfully; "your devotion to me requires so much bolstering up."

"You knew when I married you," replied the girl, "that I had no heart to give to you. You cannot ask more now than that I should be a dutiful wife; but it is no part of my duty to you to refuse to help those in distress; and in this one thing I will not obey you."

"Well, don't get bringing any more orphans for me to bring up; one's quite enough."

Keziah, with tears welling into her eyes, went out of the room. How her experiment seemed to have failed! What a bitter disappointment everything was! This sacrifice of hers, might it not be all for nothing? Her father had not bettered his ways. She had done no good to anybody. She lost faith in her theory of redemption. Yet this poor child struggled bitterly to do what she deemed her duty. The cares of a grown woman were upon her when most girls are under a mother's charge.

She was already a mother, without the experience necessary to the fostering of a young life. Hers was a dreary prospect.

Mr. Hackbit had certainly not taken ardently to his foster-son Bertram, the infant of the colliery explosion night; and now that he saw him racing about, sturdy, and self-willed, he wished he could have had his bargain to make over again. He would have struck this boy's name out of it. He was jealous, too, of every caress his wife lavished upon the orphan, and viewed it in the light of robbery from his own son and heir, who had been christened Leonard.

When Mrs. Hackbit had left the breakfast-room, her husband looked at his watch, and then went out himself. As he was leaving the house, he passed Sarah, who was coming with a message for Keziah from her mother. Strange to say, this annoyed him too. He did not like these constant communications between mother and daughter.

“Oh, Miss Kizzy,” said Sarah, coming into the house, “your mother wants you just to come in a minute.”

Keziah put on her hat and went at once.

“What is the matter, mother?” she inquired, on reaching her old home.

By way of answer, Mrs. Rimmon took her daughter into the dining-room, and there solemnly handing her a letter from Jubal, watched her face while she read it. It was dated from his uncle David’s house, and ran as follows :—

“DEAR FATHER,—I told you when I came back from school, that nothing could make me stay another term, though to please Mr. Harwyn, not you, I stayed after the last notice was given. Once for all, do you consent that I should go into my uncle David’s mill, or shall I act for myself? I give you this opportunity of behaving well in this matter. I shall not trouble you with another. My uncle would expect no premium with me, which I know will weigh with you, though no other argument would. Nowhere could I get such advantages. May I ask you to reply as soon as possible, as I must make arrangements?

“Yours truly,

“J. RIMMON.”

“What is father going to do?” asked Keziah.

“He won’t consent to the plan.”

“And why, I wonder?”

“Because he has already made arrangements.

Jubal is to learn prospecting for coal, and to be bound to Mr. Surlesden."

Keziah's face clouded. "I wish it had been someone else," she said.

"For that matter it's all as one," said Mrs. Rimmon. "It's no good binding a lad anywhere against his will."

"Mr. Surlesden doesn't bear a good character in Jumley," said Keziah; "that's the worst feature in the case."

"What do you think Jubal will do, Keziah?" said Mrs. Rimmon, studying her daughter's face attentively.

"That depends upon what outside influence is brought to bear upon him," answered Keziah.

"But who is there to influence Jubal?" said Mrs. Rimmon, inquiringly.

"Well," replied Keziah, "I can and I can't answer that; but I put it to you, mother, where is Jubal most at home—here or away? and isn't the home influence likely to be strongest? Jubal has almost lived at the Saltrings' when not at school. The question to my mind is—which of those

two homes of Jubal's has most influence ? Jumley is out of the question."

"Jubal has changed a great deal lately," remarked Mrs. Rimmon ; "ever since he went to the Saltrings'. I wish you could go and see him, Keziah. I really think it would be better if he did what his father wishes."

"Well, mother," replied Keziah, "if I must speak frankly, I should not know what to advise Jubal ; and I'll tell you why. I believe Jubal requires a firmer hand than Uncle David's. Uncle David would be too kind to him ; and I don't fancy he'd take to manufacturing. On the other hand, I don't think this Mr. Surlesden is a suitable man at all. Nevertheless, I consider it would be unwise in Jubal to thwart his father. In that case Jubal would have to struggle without his father's money to get a position ; and, I believe"—and here Keziah dropped her voice to an impressive whisper—"that there are those who would rejoice if he gave his father cause to disinherit him."

Mrs. Rimmon opened her eyes with astonishment at this, and could not be brought to understand.

“Well, it will be settled some way at any rate, for your father’s going to Manchester to-morrow to have it out with Jubal.”

“I am sorry he’s going there,” said Keziah, “very sorry. But I’m glad you’ve told me. I shall write and prepare Jubal.” With this she took her leave; and Mrs. Rimmon appeared much comforted by the mere fact that her daughter knew what had occurred.

As she was turning in at her gate, she noticed a stranger on the steps looking curiously at the house, as if uncertain whether to ring or not. Keziah went up to him directly, believing him to be an applicant for the position of clerk to her husband; for it was his latest project to have a resident confidential clerk. She was within two paces of him. He remained motionless, staring at her with a trance-like look on his face. She uttered a little muffled cry; and suddenly forgetting herself in one absorbing thought, she stretched out both her hands. It was James Elworthy. He took a step backwards as she approached him, and cast an unbending, pitiless look upon her.

“Don’t look at me in that way,” said Keziah, “as if I were your bitterest enemy.”

Elworthy laughed.

“What have you come here for?” Keziah asked.

“Not to see you,” shortly replied her old lover. “I was not aware you lived here until I saw your husband’s name” — this with a sneer — “on the gate.”

“Oh, Rupert,” said Keziah, with her hands convulsively clasped together, “you would not look at me so if you knew all. I have not been all blameworthy.”

“Do not trouble yourself to discuss that question,” Elworthy replied. “I will wish you a good morning.”

He was moving away. Keziah seized him by the arm, and would not let him go. She spoke in a fevered whisper, and the words followed each other fast.

“Rupert, tell me this one thing ; don’t refuse me.” He had turned his head away from her. “Tell me with your own lips you did not send me a

letter owning dreadful things." He was silent. "Give me this one thing to live on all the long weary years until I die," Keziah continued, her eyes dilating.

He looked down at her with burning eyes, trembling visibly, and said hoarsely—"You hardly deserve that comfort, Keziah; yet I will give it you. No, I never wrote such a letter."

He was turning once more to go. She once more stopped him. "Rupert," she said in a choking voice, "speak a single kind word to me before you go."

"How can I?" he said, in a tone full of anguish; and dashed away.

Keziah watched his retreating figure with strained eyes, her hands still clasped together, her face as white as the morning dress she wore. The figure was gone; she continued staring in the direction it had taken, until she heard a voice addressing her from behind.

"Pardon me, Madam, but are you Mrs. Hackbit?"

This time it was a stranger; his voice, for some reason, made Mrs. Hackbit shudder.

“Yes,” she replied, in a nervous tone, “I am.”

“My name is Silas Rimpler. I am the new clerk Mr. Hackbit engaged, and happening to be free from my former engagement earlier than I anticipated, I have come in order to give Mr. Hackbit the benefit.”

It flashed through Keziah's mind that this man must have seen her speaking with Rupert, and she felt sick at heart. It was with a great effort that she asked him to come into the house.

Mr. Rimpler was a short, thickset man, with very much the appearance of a bull-dog; and poor Keziah looked on him with abhorrence. He followed her into the breakfast-room, with a strange leer on his countenance, and when inside he remarked, “Mr. Hackbit is from home, is he not?” This was said in a dry, hard tone, which was nevertheless polite enough.

Keziah wondered what made him think her husband was away; and she answered almost with a look of inquiry on her face, “Yes, he is from home, and I can't say when he will be back; but I don't think he'll be very long, because he has no one to leave in the office.”

“Yes, you have the offices attached here, have

you not?" replied Mr. Rimpler. "I should like to look at them."

"I think my husband would prefer to show them you himself," said Keziah nervously, and not at all sure of her ground. "But you will take some refreshment?"

"I don't mind a glass of wine."

Keziah blushed. "We don't keep any," she said.

"Oh, indeed," said Mr. Rimpler. "Teetotallers, eh?"

"Yes," said Keziah faintly.

"Then I will take nothing, thank you, until dinner. You dine early, do you not?"

"Yes, at half-past one."

She had scarcely said these words when the door was pushed open, and a little boy, who might have been two years and a half old, entered and took hold of her gown.

"One of your little ones?" asked Mr. Rimpler, indicating the child.

"No," said Keziah, "he's an adopted child, but quite as dear to us as our own."

“How many have you, may I ask?”

“One,” replied Keziah. “Where’s Leonard, Bertram?” she added, addressing the child, who was holding her skirts.

“He’s in the garden, mother,” answered the little fellow, with scarcely any childish lisp.

Mr. Rimpler looked at the boy attentively, and seemed to see more in him than a handsome child. He appeared to be racking his brains for some circumstance or person that this child called to his mind. If this were the case, he dismissed the idea, and asked Keziah if he might see her own child.

“Ask Wilson to bring Leonard,” said Keziah to Bertram, in answer. The little fellow flew to obey.

In a short space of time the tall figure of Wilson, the nurse, appeared, bearing in her arms a healthy baby, who was quite a miniature of his father, even to a half-cynical look, at which Mr. Rimpler laughed when he saw it, declaring that he had never seen so young a child with so sage an expression. Little Bertram, who had returned with them, flushed with pleasure on hearing his little brother praised, as he thought; and mildly suggested, with his face half-

hidden in his foster-mother's gown, that Lenny could play bo-peep, and do lots of other things.

Mr. Hackbit returned for dinner, and appeared very glad to see Mr. Rimpler; and with a certain ostentation showed him over the well-planned offices attached to his house.

After dinner Mr. Hackbit informed Keziah that Mr. Rimpler would stay in the house, as he wished him to be always on the spot.

"Is he to remain here always?" she asked.

"Certainly," said Mr. Hackbit shortly. "Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know," was Keziah's answer; "I only wanted to know." And she went away with a slow step and a look of great discomfort on her face. She went to the nursery, a large room at the top of the house, where Wilson sat sewing, and Bertram and Leonard were rolling upon the floor.

Wilson looked up as she entered, and dropped the garment she was making into her lap, and openly studied Keziah's countenance.

"What is the matter, m'm?" she asked.

Keziah flushed. "Nothing," she said. "What made you ask?"

"Oh, nothing," replied Wilson, retiring into herself, and fixing her face into an expression of a strictly non-committal type.

"Mr. Rimpler is going to stay here," went on Keziah.

"Always?" asked Wilson, just as Keziah had done.

"Yes. So we must decide what room to give up to him."

"Wouldn't one of the attics do, m'm?" said Wilson, in a rasping tone.

A slow smile broke on Keziah's face. That remark was enough to show her what impression Mr. Rimpler had made upon Wilson.

"Well, not exactly," replied Keziah. "It must either be the room facing the street, or the one opposite the night nursery."

Wilson looked stony at this announcement, and said in an icy manner, "I can't help it, m'm, but I'm sure no good will come to this house if that man stays in it."

The words seemed to strike Keziah cold, not because of what they were merely, but because they echoed a repressed thought in her own heart. She crushed it instantly, and said as strongly as she was able, "That is all rubbish, Wilson. Superstitious people never have any peace. I would advise you to give it up."





CHAPTER II.

A CLASH AND A CRASH.



ON the evening of the day after Keziah's talk with her mother about Jubal, Joshua Rimmon presented himself at The Chestnuts, Bowdon. He looked older and greyer, and had anxiety stamped upon his countenance, in place of his former expression of determined self-will.

This was the first occasion on which Mr. Rimmon had seen his brother David's house. As he had been wont to remark to his acquaintances at Jumley, they were not a visiting family.

While Mr. Rimmon rang the bell, he could not help feeling some elation in prospect of the surprise

and discomfort he was about to bring to this homely household, for he had not written to say he was coming, for fear Jubal should go out.

The servant who opened the door scanned his features, and judged him to be a drawing-room visitor from the severity of his look ; and was about to show him in, when David, who had heard his brother's voice, came to him at once, all in a flurry. A visit from Joshua boded no good, and David knew it.

The two shook hands mechanically, and David took Joshua into the parlour. He was the taller of the two brothers, and Mrs. Rimmon, happening to look up, perceived her first-born's head above that of her younger son, and sprang up in her chair with as much agility as if she were still young, wringing her hands, and protesting she would not go back with him.

This was not at all pleasant for the visitor, and not in the least flattering. Joshua turned red, and said in a biting tone to his brother—

“ She is still mad, I see.”

A fresh voice replied to this statement ; it was

Jubal, who was in the room, though his father had not hitherto noticed him. There was enough of him to be seen, however, if his father had looked in his direction, for Jubal had grown apace in the past year, and now confronted his father with his face on the same level, and with the down of a coming moustache on his upper lip, and a very decisive bearing indeed.

“Grandmother’s in the wrong hands to be mad,” this young gentleman said, with a sardonic smile.

Mr. Rimmon darted an intensely angry look at his son, whom he had never once beheld since Keziah’s marriage, owing to his having spent his holidays away from home; and seeing him, his size took his breath away. He had no words to reply with; and Mrs. Rimmon drew everyone’s attention to herself by wailing out—

“Oh, Joshua, I know what you’ve come for; you shall have it, and then go.” And she fumbled in her pocket, and impulsively threw the sewn-up key at her first-born.

Mr. Rimmon’s face was livid. “What do you

mean, you idiot?" he cried, utterly forgetting himself.

David clutched at the table to steady himself; but Jubal seized his father by both arms, and pinioned him against the wall. "You dare to speak another word like that," he hissed, "and I'll fling you into the street."

But Jubal, though tall, had not his father's weight; and as soon as Mr. Rimmon had recovered from his surprise, he flung his son off with comparative ease, and said to his brother in a tone scarcely anyone ever heard him use—

"This is what you are training him to do, is it; to turn on his own father?"

"Is that at all likely, Joshua?" gasped David.

"Yes, it is, you sneaking fool," said Mr. Rimmon.

"Every word you have spoken here to-night shall be reported all over Jumley," put in Jubal, "I give you my word for it."

"And another report shall go hand-in-hand with it," retorted his father, his teeth chattering with anger; "the report that Joshua Rimmon has disinherited his son, and will have no more to do with

him. Never you set your foot inside my door again, on any pretence whatever, or I will have you kicked into the street."

"I'm not sure I couldn't make you give me shelter," replied Jubal; "but I'd rather beg my bread. Oh, don't fear, uncle David," he said, turning his flushed face on his uncle, who was ghastly. "We'll get on all right, you and I. Let that cowardly miser keep all his ill-gotten gains."

Mrs. Rimmon had sunk into her chair, and was babbling.

Joshua left, without a word of adieu.

And thus ended his first visit to his brother.

As soon as the hall-door had closed behind him, Jubal and his uncle looked at each other anxiously. David was the first to speak.

"Jubal, I don't talk much, so you are the likelier to remember the little I do say. Do you remember what I said at your father's house, about keeping a nest for his children, if ever they should want one?"

"I was not there," replied Jubal, "but Keziah told me what you said."

"Ah, I remember," continued David, passing his

hand over his brow ; “you were at the Saltrings’. Well, I didn’t know how soon you would need me ; but you are not an unexpected guest, Jubal ; the home has long been ready for you.”

“ Oh, uncle,” cried Jubal, “you are too good to me, you are indeed. But for you, I believe I should go downright to the bad ; for father has kept my brain in a ferment of anger all my life ; and sometimes I have felt that I would ruin father, if it cost me a life’s work to do it.”

“Never think of it again, Jubal,” said his uncle impressively. “It never pays to try and do God’s work for him ; we are too ignorant, and too weak.”

Jubal looked sullen, as if he could not shake off a feeling which was the outcome of years, in one moment, at another’s bidding.

“I tell you what you can do, Jubal,” went on David, noting the boy’s look with some alarm ; “you can become an honourable man, without reproach, in spite of your training, in spite of all. That should be your greatest triumph.”

“ Oh, uncle,” said Jubal, “I can’t act with you ; or at this moment I should pretend to promise you

all you ask. I can hardly even say I will try to do what you wish; my heart is too bitter. I have been so used to having such thoughts as these that I can't break myself; I have lost the taste for anything better, if ever I had it."





CHAPTER III.

THE LIVING DEATH OF LOVE.



WEEK later, Mrs. Beredith and her daughter Lucy were driving to Kenilworth by way of Stone Court, and were noticing a number of foxhounds disporting themselves on the ill-kept grass in front of the Court. While they were looking, they saw James Elworthy come out at the door, and mount his horse; and Mrs. Beredith stopped her carriage to wait for him.

“Why, doctor,” she said, rubbing her fat hands one over the other, as was her habit when much pleased, “you have actually been called in to Stone Court, then?”

“Yes,” the young man answered, with a faint

smile; "Lady Conquest is taken suddenly ill. I was called in because their own medical man is at a distance."

"If you are not too busy," Mrs. Beredith said, "will you step in to-night?"

"I was about to say I was coming in," said Elworthy. "I have something I wish to say to you, and all the past week I have been dreadfully busy. And I must be off now," he added, looking at his watch, "or I shall not finish till late." So, raising his hat in a solemn manner, he rode away; and the ladies went on to Kenilworth, and talked about nothing but Dr. Elworthy and Keziah Hackbit.

"You know, Lucy," said Mrs. Beredith, "it was horrid of Keziah to marry her cousin, even if she did not believe in Elworthy."

"So I think," replied Lucy warmly. "She might at least have waited."

"If she had waited, it would never have happened," said her mother.

"I am glad that he came back to Leamington," said Lucy. "It shows everybody he has nothing to be ashamed of."

“I don’t know that altogether,” said Mrs. Beredith. “I think he ought to be and is very much ashamed of having shown himself such a coward.”

“Well, mother, you would not hear anybody else say what you are saying.”

“I defend Dr. Elworthy,” replied Mrs. Beredith, “because I think that the worst thing he ever did was no great sin. But that doesn’t blind me to the fact that it was cowardly of him to go away and hide himself. He ought to have trusted in God not to let the wrong man suffer.”

“But do you believe, mother, that the right one always does come off clear?”

This question rather nonplussed Mrs. Beredith, who could express her theories and beliefs, but was rarely able to bring forward any conclusive proofs when asked for them, which was somewhat a drawback.

As Mrs. Beredith was silent, Lucy ventured to put a further question.

“Suppose, mother, that you had quarrelled very much with somebody, till everybody knew you to be his enemy, and talked about it. And suppose that

that somebody had been found dead by you, and it flashed into your mind, 'I shall be the first one they will take into custody for this, and they may hang me,' I think, mother you might run away and hide yourself, under a false name, with that thought, although you might regret it later on. Afterwards every day would make it harder to disclose your real name."

"You are quite coming out, Lucy," was Mrs. Beredith's comment. "I had no idea you could argue in that style."

Lucy blushed deeply, and did not own, as she might have done, that she was but quoting from memory. She had heard this said by a friend who had called at their house to another lady visitor, who was debating whether or not to call in Dr. Elworthy again when he had returned to Leamington after his acquittal.

"I can't understand Keziah's marrying," went on Lucy. "If I loved a man as she seemed to love him, I should remain single for his sake, even if he were ever so false to me."

"You never know what you will do," replied

her mother, "until you are put to the test ; and we can't tell what influenced Keziah. And," she went on, her eyes growing moist, "if I hadn't as good as dismissed her by aggravating her so at Mr. Saltring's, all this might never have happened, and the poor lamb would have come back here, and he would have come back, and all would have been right, I am sure. I at any rate have not been free from blame in the matter."

"I don't see that at all, mother. Keziah ought to have known you well enough not to get angry at what you said. And it was very unfair of her to leave us in the way she did ;"—this in a smothered tone of regret for a lost companion who had made her life so happy.

"Do you know, Lucy, I somehow fancy that Rupert is going to call to say something about Keziah to-night. There was that in his face that I have never seen unless Keziah was in the question."

"Is it possible than he can have seen her ?" said Lucy.

"Impossible," replied her mother. "I have

never told him where she is living, though I should have done so if he had asked me. I am sure he would not ask anybody but myself: and even if he knew, he is too honourable to go near her."

"He may have seen her by accident," Lucy suggested.

"That's possible," her mother agreed. "Poor fellow!" she sighed.

That evening, about seven o'clock, Mrs. Beredith and her daughter were sitting in their drawing-room, with their embroidery in their laps, at an open window overlooking the garden, which was now fragrant with flowers. There were two entrances to their house: the one was close upon the street, the other led through the garden quite from the opposite direction. Rupert entered oftenest through the garden gate, being on such friendly terms with the family. He could thus come upon them unawares and without ringing; and this evening the two ladies saw him approaching from between the rose bushes, his erect figure moving gravely towards them, and his face wearing the faintest possible smile. He slowly took off his hat as he saw them

looking at him ; every movement of his was slow now. His pulse was slow. He had grown old too soon. Only one thing had power to fire him ; we have seen what that was.

The window at which the ladies were seated opened to the ground, and Rupert passed in, saying, in his gentle musical voice, "Dear Mrs. Beredith, grant me a favour to-night."

"What is it ?" she inquired.

"Don't think it too much," he responded. "Let me call you mother ; I shall feel nearer to you, and more able to speak ; not that I can feel more to you than I have done ever since you came to me in my sore need."

"My poor, dear boy," replied Mrs. Beredith, as if he really belonged to her, "of course you must call me mother, not only to-night, but always ; and Lucy shall be your sister."

"Yes," put in that young lady heartily, "I will indeed."

He seated himself behind Mrs. Beredith, and said huskily, "Mother, I have seen her."

"How did it come about ?" Mrs. Beredith asked,

stroking his hair with her plump hand, for his head now sank low.

“It was in this way,” he began. “There had been an advertisement in the *Lancet* from a medical man leaving Jumley. He offered his instruments and books for sale at a low figure, and I went to Jumley to see if there was anything that suited me. I went early in the morning on my freest day, and I suddenly saw her husband’s name on a gate leading to a fine house, and I stood staring at it as if petrified. While I stood there, she came along the road, in a white dress.”

He was silent after this, and Mrs. Beredith softly asked him, “Did you speak to her?”

“She spoke to me.”

“What did she say, my poor darling?” said Mrs. Beredith tenderly.

Elworthy raised his face, the muscles of which were working in evident agitation. “She asked me,” said he, “if I had written a letter to her, owning dreadful things.”

Lucy at this point raised both her hands, with a scared look at her mother, but said not a word.

"Then, some villain deceived her," Mrs. Beredith broke out, in a tone of conviction. "What villainy! Oh, that we could get to know who wrote that letter! Did you tell her you had not written it?" she went on.

"Yes, I told her," he said sorrowfully. "But what good can that do now? There is nothing left now."

"There is something left," said Mrs. Beredith. "We might find out who wrote the letter."

"She knew my writing very well," said Elworthy. "It must have been a clever forgery to impose on her."

"It's that Hackbit, you may depend," said Lucy, now putting in her word. "He wanted her himself."

"I see the same hand in this as that which betrayed me to the police," said Elworthy.

"Whose hand?" asked Mrs. Beredith, breathless.

"That I can't say," answered the doctor.

"Do you mean you don't know?" said Mrs. Beredith.

"Yes, I don't know," he made answer.

"But you suspect?" suggested his new mother.

"I may suspect," he said; "but I ought not to say whom I suspect."

"You may depend it's that Hackbit," again put in Lucy; "for he has got all the gain out of the business, at any rate."

But the doctor said nothing in answer to this, and all of them were silent for some minutes. At last Elworthy said—

"I got one comfort out of seeing her."

"What was that?"

"She doesn't look happy," he said bitterly. "She's thinner, and paler, and older looking."

"O Rupert," said Mrs. Beredith, "that's not like you, to be glad of such a thing."

"No, it's cowardly to say it," he said, grinding his foot upon the floor. "I'm not half the man I was—I have grown so bitter. But I own the truth when I say it made me glad to see she was not happy without me. Had she looked happy, I think it would have driven me mad. Ah!" he said, stretching out his arms as if to grasp an imaginary object, "I could have made her happy. She has brought it on herself." And with these words he

rose and stood with his back to the mantelpiece, and his chin lying low upon his breast.

“My dear Rupert,” said Mrs. Beredith, “don’t you think you had better try and never think of her? It can’t be good for you.”

“Try and not think of her!” said Elworthy, with a scornful laugh. “Not think of her whose presence has lightened the drudgery of my work so long; whose presence made even the prison cell light to me. Not think of her who stood by my bedside all through my delirium, when I was ill after my trial was over! Take away my life and I won’t think of her—that is, if men cease to think when they die.”

Mrs. Beredith became very serious, and said impressively, “If it is a safety-valve for you to speak to me of her from time to time, do so; but for Heaven’s sake, for your own sake, for Keziah’s sake, think as little as you can.”

“Do you think I would harm her?” said Elworthy bitterly.

“Oh, I don’t know what I think,” said Mrs. Beredith, “but the whole business frightens me.”

“It need not trouble you,” was Elworthy’s reply. “I know my duty to another man’s wife. But it kills me to think of the worn look on her face, and I can’t help cursing him for not making her happy.”

“Why, a moment ago you said that was your comfort,” said Mrs Beredith anxiously.

“Ah,” he said, “I don’t know what I say or what I think sometimes :” and he took up his hat as if about to go.

“Stay and have some supper with us, Rupert.” Mrs. Beredith had grown so accustomed to think of him by this name that she still employed it.

“No,” he said, holding his hat in front of him, and looking down into it at a stethoscope that was there ensconced, “not to-night ;” and with an apathetic shake-hands he passed out through the window, and took two or three strides down the gravel path. He turned suddenly, and retraced his steps ; and, holding out his hand to Mrs. Beredith once more, said—

“A thousand thanks, my dear friend and mother, for your ready sympathy and kindness. Forgive me if I seem brusque. I have not grown accustomed to

my fate yet." And as he passed between the rose-bushes once more, he thought—"Had I loved Lucy Beredith instead of Keziah Rimmon, she would have been faithful; and I almost think that, had Keziah never come, I might have loved Lucy. But this is always the way of fate." And for the first time the thought flashed in his mind that poor Lucy might even yet love him; and he thought with admiration of the unselfish way in which she had acted when he had disclosed his love for Keziah, how she had sympathised throughout, how ungrudgingly she had always praised Keziah, until Keziah had left him; and he thought with bitterness that he could not even make this poor child happy by marrying her. Keziah had brought herself to marry another, whom he firmly believed she did not love; but he could not. No, not even now that he had proof of her being false to him.

And has the reader, too, suspected Lucy's well-hidden secret? If so, no one around her suspected it, so well did that simple-hearted girl conceal it. How often we find that the weakest amongst us have surpassing strength in some one particular.

Lucy was a very ordinary girl, and could never have understood a problem in Euclid; and yet she had understood the problem of her own life, and was working it out in her own simple way.





CHAPTER IV.

A DEPARTURE, AND A NEW DEPARTURE.



WHILE poor Elworthy had been pouring out his heart to Mrs. Beredith, Keziah Hackbit was being carried by express train to Manchester, whither she had been summoned by an imperative telegram.

The telegram ran thus :—"Your grandmother says she must see you. Come quickly. She is near the end." And at the moment when Elworthy was passing between Mrs. Beredith's rose-bushes on his way to his desolate lodgings, Keziah was passing up her Uncle David's garden path.

Never since her marriage had Keziah been so miserable as this night, coming to her uncle's house.

The perfume in the garden, even the creaking of the gate, seemed to say to her, "You were free then; now you are bound;" and none who have never been bound can know the depth of misery conveyed in this thought.

She rang the bell, and, having done so, was startled when the door was opened; she had forgotten that she had rung.

The servant, whose face was quite familiar to her, was amazed that Keziah, who had always shown herself so friendly, should not offer her a single word of greeting.

"Your poor grandma's very ill," she said to Keziah.

This reminded Keziah what she had come for.

"Oh, poor grandma," she said. "Who is with her?"

"Well, the doctor's there, miss," answered the girl, who had seen Keziah only when unmarried.

Keziah went upstairs to her grandmother's room without delay. The old lady was high up in the bed, supported by a number of pillows, and was looking, with eyes already glazing, towards the

door. She was watching for her grand-daughter, and yet when she saw her enter, took her for a stranger.

“Don’t let people come to see me die,” she cried, clasping her hands together. “I want Keziah. Why don’t you tell her to come? I have something to tell her.”

Keziah went and knelt down by the bedside, and took the thin hand that had toiled so long for the sons who had since grown prosperous, and was at length going to its long rest. “Grandmother,” said she, “don’t you know me? I am Kizzy.”

“You, Kizzy! No you are not. I know my singing-bird. You can’t deceive me. My singing-bird had rosy cheeks. You haven’t. Her eyes were bright. Yours aren’t. She was pretty. You are not.”

Keziah moaned, and hid her face. The old lady looked at David. “Davy,” she said, “you’ve not sent for her, or she would have come. I’m sure singing-bird would have come.”

After saying these words, the old lady’s eyes became fixed on something in the corner of the

room. All eyes followed in the same direction. They could see nothing extraordinary; nothing in fact, but an old-fashioned bureau.

“ Oh ! ” said the old lady, “ but that’s beautiful, that is beautiful ! ”

“ What is beautiful ? ” asked David, the tears coursing down his cheeks. “ What is it you see that’s beautiful ? ”

“ Why, Davy,” she said. “ It isn’t the forges; but it’s very bright. Now it’s very good of you to bring me into such a bright place to die in.” And she continued to stare.

Keziah was now crying bitterly.

The old lady gave a start, and withdrew her eyes. They rested once more on David.

“ Davy,” she said. “ Burn this. Don’t let Joshua know. Burn it. He wouldn’t let me rest in my grave if he knew I had left it.” And she gave a crumpled piece of paper into David’s hand.

It contained nothing, and nothing was written on it.

After this, the bright light came once more into her face, and she fell to rocking herself to and fro,

and singing softly, so very softly and faintly that it sounded like somebody else singing, quite in the distance. She looked very happy. All the care had gone out of her face. She softly stroked one of her hands, and cooed to it, and said something. David bent low to listen.

“He’s a bonny lad,” she was heard to say, “and he shall be a gentleman;” and she patted her hand again, and stroked it tenderly. “He shall be a gentleman, and shan’t have to strive and work, and scrape like us; and we shall all live so happy.”

“Oh,” moaned David, “she thinks it’s one of her children, a baby in her arms.”

The old lady caught his words. “It’s little Joshua,” she said, “a bonny lad, a pretty lad. He’ll grow up and take care of his mother one day; and how fast he grows,” she said, admiringly, looking at the imaginary burden in her arms.

All at once her eyes were again fixed where they had been previously, and she raised her hand and pointed, and then began rapidly counting. “One—two—three—four—well it’s beautiful—one—two—three—four—five”—her hand dropped; her eyes

remained staring: and her lips moved, as if still counting something.

“Oh, mother, mother,” said David, laying his head beside hers on the pillow, “my poor mother.” Her eyes moved towards him one moment, and her fingers twitched, as if she would try to touch him, but the power was gone.

With her eyes thus fastened upon him, she passed from death to life; and no one knew the precise moment of her release.

No one attempted to move, till the doctor said, in a low tone, “It’s all over.”

Keziah looked up. “Oh,” she said in a tone of anguish, “I wish I could have got here sooner.” And as she raised her streaming face, her eyes met Jubal’s. His expression puzzled her greatly.

“Jubal,” she said to him, “come down stairs; I want to speak to you.”

She rose with weariness of step, and passed out at the door without addressing her uncle a word. He scarcely noticed her going out.

Jubal followed her at once. He had not been on the best terms with his sister since her marriage;

he had disapproved of the whole thing. He was therefore inclined to disapprove of any observation she might make, if she had called him out to advise him, which he believed to be her purpose. She had always been very free in advising him. Jubal had thought this over, and decided that he would have no more of Keziah's dictation ; he would have no more of that than he would of his father's. Keziah had often twitted him with not being manly. He would show her he was manly now, and was not to be interfered with.

As soon as they were outside the bedroom door, Keziah said to Jubal, putting her arm round him, in a manner she had never done in the old days, " Dear Jubal, let us be friends always, Jubal. I have so little to make me happy," she went on, hesitating, her voice being a pleading in itself. " O Jubal," she continued, for he made no reply, " you won't let me lose everything ? You will let me have a brother left ? "

His silence drove her to say more than she had intended, and she was much overwrought by what she had just seen.

“Jubal,” she began again, “you mustn’t forsake me, I am so very miserable.”

“It’s your own fault,” said Jubal, turning his head away. “You brought it on yourself.”

The words struck a chill to poor Keziah’s heart; but with a great effort she said, in a coaxing way, still clutching him, “Jubal, when we were—at home”—she said hesitatingly these two last words—“and I was sometimes sharp to you, you used to say to me, ‘You shouldn’t kick anyone who is down, Kizzy.’”

“And you did it,” broke in Jubal.

“Well, if I did, forgive me,” said his sister pleadingly. “I only meant to help you.”

Jubal had grown too embittered to be easily moved now by his sister’s words; and it aggravated him to hear her talk in such a strain. So he said to her, with some authority in the tone—

“As people make their beds, so they must lie on them. If you have made yours badly, I can’t help it. You never asked my advice.”

This was too much for Keziah. She left her brother and went downstairs. She felt frozen up.

She regretted now, above all, that she had said she was miserable. She had laid open her wound, and it had been scoffed at. She was past all help, and must bear on till the end. And she thought with horror that she was so young, and had, in all probability, many years to live.

She had sat before the fire a long time when David came downstairs. The doctor had gone before, but Keziah had not heard him go ; she had heard nothing since Jubal's last words. She had counted so intensely on Jubal's sympathising with her.

David, when he saw Keziah's melancholy attitude, of course did not ascribe it to its real cause. How seldom the right cause is assigned for a sad look !

"It's all over now, Kizzy," he said to her, in a tone he meant to be encouraging ; "she's better off."

"Yes," assented Keziah faintly, "she is better off."

The tone in which she spoke caused her uncle to look her full in the face.

"Why, Kizzy, you do look ill," he said, and he

at once went to the door to call a servant, and give an order for refreshments. David scarcely ever rang the bell when he wanted anything. Somehow it made him feel ashamed. All his ancestors had had neither bells, nor servants to answer them; and David, who himself in his youthful days had fetched the water from the well, collected wood for the fires, and had often lit them, and had carried his father's dinner in a basin to the pit bank, could not now bring himself to ring the bell: so he asked for everything he wanted, as on this occasion.

David and Keziah talked on.

“What do you think brought on this last illness of grandmother's?” asked Keziah.

“Well,” replied David, “it's what I hardly like to speak of.”

“You mean my father's visit; I can see you do.”

“Well, you see, there was a great quarrel between Jubal and his father, and we had to carry her to bed that night, and she never got up again. We all thought she would be better. Not one of us expected the end.”

Death never is expected. It always comes with a shock, let it come when and how it may.

Speaking of Jubal's quarrel with his father made David wonder where he was now, and he asked Keziah if she knew.

She said she thought he had gone out.

But Jubal was not gone out. He had waited on the dark landing till he had seen his uncle and the doctor pass out; he had then re-entered the room they had quitted, and locked the door behind him.

A light was burning there. The fire was going out. The ashes subsided as Jubal entered, with a sound that made him start and look towards the bed. He could see nothing there but the form under a white sheet. Yet he could not keep his eyes off it.

Jubal carried in his hand the scrap of paper with nothing on it which his uncle had thrown down; and he began directly to search over his grandmother's possessions, to find, if possible, one like it, with something on it. After listening to her dying words, he believed firmly that she had had in her possession some paper that was capable of injuring his father, perhaps even of ruining him. So long

had he kept his mind in the same attitude that he was on the alert even at a deathbed to seize upon anything that might tell against his father.

He found the sewn-up key in his grandmother's dress-pocket, and, as a matter of course, the box it fitted. His eyes fell upon the money Keziah had placed there, and he laughed scornfully. "Even she must hoard something up," he thought to himself.

He locked the box again, and replaced the key, The paltry gold was not what he was looking for.

All the time Jubal was looking about, he was listening, to make sure that no one was coming. He need not have troubled himself. People don't usually come into a room where a corpse lies, especially one not yet cold, unless they have some strong reason for it. Jubal examined every article in the box that poor Mrs. Rimmon had gone to service with, and found nothing. There was nowhere left to search, except the bed.

He felt a natural revulsion from this. But his purpose was strong; and he thought to himself. "She has it about her, no doubt;" and he stealthily

took hold of the sheet. At the same moment the ashes moved in the grate once more. Jubal started. But the very act of starting removed the linen-sheet from the dead face beneath it; and to his horror, the eyes stared at him, stony, and ghastly, and awful.

Jubal conquered his fear, and passed his hand under the pillow—there was only one now—the others lay by the side of the bed. He felt nothing.

He turned the sheet a little lower down, and with a feeling of horror, which he never forgot as long as he lived, he passed his hand over the chest of the corpse.

Yes, there was some paper there. It was blue paper. He drew it out.

It was like the paper she had given to David, only there was writing on it. Jubal at once placed it in his pocket, and covered the corpse as it had been, and then left the room, glancing involuntarily back as he quitted it, at the still white form beneath the sheet.

This had been a great undertaking for Jubal, who had never seen a corpse before.

He now came down stairs, without having read the paper. He had no courage left for that.

He joined his uncle and Keziah, who were having tea.

Keziah did not look at him when he came in. She would have liked to do so, but she could not. Her eyes would not raise themselves.

She drank her tea in silence, and then said faintly, she would go to bed, for she must go back early the next morning, and she was very tired.

"Ah, what a pity now, there is no bed aired ready," said David. Then his face suddenly brightened. "But that doesn't matter, of course. You will go to sleep at Mrs. Towers's, won't you?"

"I suppose I had better," replied Keziah, resignedly.

"Why, of course," said David, "she'll be so glad to see you. I don't think she looks very well. Worried."

"I think I will go now," said Keziah. "I will come in here to-morrow morning, to say good-bye to you."



CHAPTER V.

WRONGS WITHOUT REMEDIES.



It had been silently understood that there should be no communication between The Chestnuts and The Hollies. This was rather unfortunate in some respects. It deprived David of a great comfort, and it set the neighbourhood talking more and more about Maud. It was said in Bowdon now, that this strange young lady had brought home a new toy in the shape of a husband, and the gossips speculated freely on the length of time that might elapse before this toy should be thrown on one side. Remarks of this nature had even met Maud's ears, and she treated them with the same scorn we have formerly noticed in her.

The sudden appearance of Keziah at her house was a downright shock. Perhaps there was no one in the world Maud loved like Keziah. When the maid took in her name, Maud fairly rushed out in her great joy. Nobody had informed Maud of Mrs. Rimmon's illness. She knew no reason therefore for Keziah's coming.

"Oh, Kizzy!" broke out Maud, rapturously. "I had begun to think we should never meet. It is such a long time." And with exactly her old manner, she pulled her friend by the arm, and made her go quickly upstairs.

"Is your husband at home?" asked Keziah, whose state of mind made her nervous in prospect of seeing fresh faces.

"Oh," replied Maud, with a light laugh, "he is congenially occupied in studying surgery."

Maud led Keziah into the room she had occupied when she had lived there; and banging the door to, took her friend by the shoulders, and said—

"This room has always been kept ready for you, Keziah; so I have thought of you more than you seem to have thought of me."

"I have thought of you enough, I am sure, Maud, for it has been every day."

While she spoke, Maud was looking at Keziah. The flush that had come into her face at sight of Maud had died out, and she was quite shocked at the alteration.

"Why, Kizzy," she said, "what have you been doing with yourself?"

Keziah at these words burst out crying. Maud began to take off her things in spite of her, and put a light to the fire, that was always kept laid.

"Oh it's too warm for a fire," urged Keziah; "don't light it."

"I tell you what," replied Maud, "you are shivering like an aspen, and you are as cold as you can be."

"Poor grandmamma has just died," said Keziah, as if to explain.

"Your grandmamma just dead!" exclaimed Maud, as if she thought she had not heard aright.

"Yes, she died to night. Uncle David telegraphed for me and I came."

“Why didn’t your uncle send for me, I wonder?” said Maud.

“You could hardly expect him to send for you,” said Keziah deprecatingly.

A pained look passed over Maud’s face.

“Kizzy, you have grown much thinner,” she said, after a moment’s silence. “Don’t be reticent with your old friend. You are not happy, Kizzy.”

“Happy!” replied Keziah, with the saddest of smiles, as if the word were ridiculous in connection with her. “I never expected to be happy. I only hoped to be at peace, and that has been denied me; for what if all should prove useless, and the struggle be in vain? Maud, the worst is, I feel now that I have done wrong to marry my cousin. I cannot redeem my old love by degrading myself. Oh! Maud, it’s an endless struggle not to sink low, oh, so low, with nothing but degrading influences round you. What have I done,” she cried impetuously, bursting into tears, “to have my life blighted and cursed as it seems to be?”

“My good Kizzy,” said Maud impressively, “I prophesy that happiness will come to you in the end,

as I know the purity of your heart and motives. I cannot see how ; but happiness will come to you. The worst things you have ever done would be called virtue in another ; and if in some things you have been mistaken, that has not been your fault, and I have faith to believe it shall not be your misfortune in the end. I wish I had as much hope for myself, Kizzy."

"Are you unhappy ?" inquired Keziah with open eyes.

"My case is more hopeless than yours."

Keziah's gentle heart, ever ready to sympathise with others, was moved at once by the words, and the look which accompanied them. "Do tell me all about it," she said, touching her friend's hand caressingly.

"My case is summed up in a fairy tale I once read," she replied, in a tone of painful raillery against herself. "It was about a discontented little girl, who was always longing for a nugget of gold that was fixed in a goblin's doorpost ; and one day the goblin gave it to her. When she got it, all the bright gold turned dim, and it struck her cold ; and

she could not get rid of it. She begged the goblin to take it back, and he refused."

"O Maud," said Kizzy imploringly, "don't talk in that bitter tone. What do you mean?"

"My dear Kizzy," said Mrs. Towers more calmly, and yet with a cynical edge to her voice, "I have the gratification of knowing and feeling hourly that my husband is not happy with me; and nothing I can do makes a difference."

"O Maud," cried Keziah energetically, "do not rest night or day till you have made him tell the reason, unless it be, as I really think, a morbid fancy of yours."

"No, no," replied Maud decisively, "he is not happy with me. But that is not all: he has some secret he is keeping from me. He asks me for large sums of money, and never tells me where it goes, and he behaves so peculiarly about it all."

"But he must have money, you know."

"Yes, and isn't he welcome to every penny I have? It is the mystery that I dislike."

Keziah could not think of any answer; but she put her arm round her friend caressingly, and,

raising her sweet face, with the rapt look of a saint upon it, said—

“Maud, I think we can bear to live and struggle to do right, if anyone loves us truly. It seems like a promise that Heaven is not all a delusion ; and I love you truly, Maud.”

“You are a blessed comforting angel,” said her friend, embracing her. “Heaven doesn’t seem to be a delusion when I look in your face.”

“Oh, you don’t know how wicked I feel sometimes. I have terrible thoughts often.”

Maud shook her head incredulously, and then, as if to throw off the subject which was painful to her, she said lightly, “Who do you think is staying with me now ?”

“I can have no idea.”

“Laura Saltring. Isn’t that a surprise ? She’s such a nice little girl, or rather big girl, for she has grown as tall as I am, and is so very pretty.”

“Laura Saltring !” said Mrs. Hackbit. A sort of cloud passed over Keziah’s heart, for she remembered that Laura had not been kind to her, and she longed to have her friend all to herself this one

night, as she must return home early the next day.

At this moment a gong sounded. "Ah," said Maud, "that's to summon us to coffee. But you must have a mutton-chop. I am sure you must need it."

Keziah, after a vain protest that she needed nothing, was compelled to yield; and after Maud had given her orders, the two went together, as they had so often done, into Maud's favourite sitting-room.

On one of the many luxurious chairs a young lady was sitting, whom Keziah would scarcely have recognised as Laura Saltring, so lovely had she become, and so grown-up. Her long, light hair, worn, when we last saw her, in ringlets, was now coiled low on her neck, and the shape of her face was better seen. There was something in Laura's look that reminded Keziah forcibly of a picture she had seen of Lady Hamilton. She was wearing a dark-blue dress which fitted her beautifully, showing the outline of a most perfect figure. Laura was not surprised to see Keziah, for she had asked one of

the servants directly, "Who had come?" She took care to keep herself informed upon most subjects that interested her. Keziah, who had never liked her, now felt a bitter antipathy to her which she could scarcely have explained, and her greeting was most cold and stiff. Laura noted it, and smiled. Keziah saw the smile, and noted that.

This greeting was just over when Tom Towers came in. There was a faint flush on his cheek, and he looked painfully thin. He strode into the room in a nervous fashion, glancing from one end of the room to the other in an objectless way, and touching Keziah's hand so lightly that she would not have been sure that he had touched it at all, had it not left hers cold.

Laura watched the greeting with evident interest. Maud did not; she was pouring out coffee, and uncovering the dainty chop which had been cooked for Keziah.

Towers offered no remark after this simple greeting, and Laura, who had felt herself snubbed, was likewise dumb. Keziah, to whom the silence was positively painful, asked Mr. Towers how his

uncle and aunts were. He answered, with an effort, that he thought they were as usual. And again silence fell on the company.

Maud brought Tom his coffee. As he took it, he said to her in a low tone, "You must excuse me a little time, Maud ; I want to go out."

"But you forget how late it is," said Maud, fixing her great glowing eyes upon him. "Where can you want to go?"

"I can't tell you, Maud," he replied, his eyes moving uneasily from one object to another, a habit he appeared to have contracted since their marriage, and which was highly offensive to Maud.

"At least," went on Maud, "you may tell your wife where you are going."

To which he replied, "If you have no confidence in me, why don't you tell me to go? Tell me, and I will go, and for ever, and cease to trouble you."

Maud moved away with a quiet dignity, into which a good deal of scorn appeared to enter.

This conversation was carried on in tones inaudible to the visitors. But Keziah noticed that

something was wrong, and instinctively looked towards Laura to see if she noticed it. That demure personage had her eyes fixed on her coffee, and was mechanically stirring it with her spoon ; but nothing had been lost upon her.

Tom Towers got up and went out. Poor Maud tried hard to look as if nothing were wrong, and, after drinking some coffee, said to Laura, "I want you to be very kind to us to-night, and not mind our leaving you, as Keziah and I have much to talk of, and very little time."

"I will go to my room," said Laura, rising at once.

"You need not do that," said Maud. "We are going ourselves ; we have no wish to banish you."

"But I should prefer to go to bed now," said Laura ; "so I wish you good night."

"Let us talk with the light out," suggested Keziah, when Laura had gone.

"But we shall be quite in the dark if we do," rejoined Maud. "It isn't like winter, when we have the firelight."

“But it’s moonlight outside. Let us draw the blinds up.”

Maud assented, and the moonlight streamed in.

They sat together and talked over their changed lives till they were startled by hearing a distant clock strike one.

“There’s Tom coming in,” Maud said, indicating the gate; “and there’s somebody with him.”

That somebody turned, and the moonlight falling on his face, Keziah gave a start, and gripped Maud by the arm, and pointed.

“Well?” said Maud, in a low voice. “Of course he must be meeting some one, or else why should he want to go out?”

“Whom do you suppose it is?” said Keziah, huskily.

“I don’t know.”

“My husband’s clerk,” said Keziah; “a man I utterly distrust.”

The two girls held each other’s hands, and stood transfixed at the window.

While they looked, they heard a sound in the room above them. It was like the closing of a

window. Both the figures at the gate looked up, and moved into the shade.

“What could that be?” said Keziah.

“It sounded like Laura’s window,” replied Maud. “She often opens the window at night; she likes to get the air.”

“Nonsense,” said Keziah. “How can you be so blind, Maud? My advice to you is, don’t trust Laura, and get her out of the house as soon as you can. She is not safe. Mark my words.”

“Oh, Keziah, fancy not trusting a child of Mr. Saltring. Laura is vain, but that is her worst fault.”

“Are children to be judged by their parents?” asked Keziah bitterly. “Do you judge me by mine?”

“Of course not. There’s Tom come in. Do not appear to have seen him. Oh, Kizzy, my dear friend,” she said, putting her hot cheek against Keziah’s for a moment, “I would give anything in the world to be free again.”

Towers did not come into the room; he went upstairs; and Maud and Keziah stayed down-

stairs until daylight streamed in upon them, when Keziah went upstairs to get ready for her journey homeward.





CHAPTER VI.

INGRATITUDE.

SIX weeks previous to this, the birth of twin boys had delighted the Rev. Brougham Banner beyond description; and he solemnly remarked to his vicar, who was congratulating him, “that these two should be laid upon the altar of the Church.” This was metaphorical; but, as we have seen, Mr. Banner liked metaphor.

About a week after the joyful event, Mrs. Layton paid a visit to the curate’s wife, bringing with her some flowers. Mr. Banner’s one servant, on opening the door, grinned as only Langtonian servants could grin, and asked her to step inside, remarking—

“The master’s mar’s ’ere, and ’is par too; they’ve just comed, mum, and will you step hupstairs?”

Mrs. Layton on hearing of the “mar” and “par,” wished herself elsewhere ; but there seemed to be no help for it ; she had come and she must go through with it.

The advent of Mr. and Mrs. Banner, senior, was as little appreciated by their son as by Mrs. Layton ; for Brougham chose to keep carefully in the background the unpresentable parents, who by dint of the monotonous weighing of tea and sugar, and the unstringing of farthing dips, and the distribution of ha’p’orths of sweets to the infant population of the neighbourhood where they lived, had scraped together the funds by virtue of which the feet of their son found a place beneath every rich man’s table. Mr. and Mrs. Banner, senior, had often expressed a wish to visit their son, since, as they explained in their letters, in awful writing and worse spelling, “they had got a very good yung mon in the shop, as was to be trusted to look after the bisness while they had a holaday.”

Their dutiful son had always raised some objection to this scheme, and hitherto successfully. But on hearing of the birth of two grandchildren, the

parental ardour broke forth, and determined to give "Bruey" a pleasant surprise. However, when the curate, from his wife's sitting-room upstairs, heard the well-known brogue of his father in the hall, the colour mounted to his reverend countenance, and fixed itself there.

"We wonner make a nize," said a voice from below; and four feet began to be heard mounting the stairs. The first to appear on the landing above, was a little man, bald, grey, ruddy, and rather corpulent withal. He wore a light suit of tweed, and a home-made shirt. Round his throat was a check handkerchief. With another of the same pattern he was mopping his head, while he beamed benevolence on his discomfited son and heir, who stood before him in a state of anguish not to be described.

"By gom, Bruey," said the parent, stretching out his hand; "I congratulate yer, I do. The missis and me has brought yer a bit o' bacon, and brought your missis some new-laid heggs from our own hins—they as you used to be so fond of, you know, Bruey;" and as he spoke, his comely wife reached his side, her shawl bulging out in a fashion

that suggested eggs and bacon. She held up a fat and rosy face to be kissed, and Brougham obediently kissed her.

"Bless his soul," said the mother admiringly, "how well he looks; an' I've baked him a cake, I have—one as he used ter like, an' it's in the hankercher, it is. What an yer done with the hankercher?" she asked, nudging her husband.

"By gom," answered the little man, "if I havener left it at the station."

The mother's face grew grave in a moment, and the "Oh!" that broke from her was indeed pathetic.

"That's a pretty pass, that is," she said; "an' after I've a been an' sat up to bake it after I'd minded the shop, an' I said as how Bruey 'ud like a bit o' cake like he used ter have when he was a' wom."

"Never mind about the cake, mother," said Brougham, at his wit's end what to do. "Come and see Martha."

"Ah! we'll go and see Marther," replied the two; and they trotted along to the room where

Martha was, with a step as heavy as their honest hearts were light.

They had scarcely entered the room when Mrs. Layton's knock was heard, and she was quickly announced, and entered the room; and before the curate could say anything, his father had said in no dulcet tones—

“A nee'bour, I suppose; come in, mum, and sit yer down.”

Mrs. Layton at once recognised in him the “par” alluded to by the girl.

“How d'e do, Mrs. Layton,” said the curate. “These are—aw—some friends from the country.”

Mrs. Layton smiled.

“Now, listen to him,” said the parent, again breaking in; “he always liked his joke, he did. Why, when he wor a little lad, a-going to the Wisleyan day school, he . . .”

Brougham interrupted him precipitately at this point, and asked Mrs. Layton if she would go down to the drawing-room, and the babies should be brought to be shown to her.

“Oh, lor', she needn't be for mindin' us,” broke

in the mother. "We're only his father and mother."

The curate looked despairingly round. It had all come out; there was no help for it.

"Look 'ere what we've gone and brought him," went on the mother, indicating the bacon, wrapped in check, "an' these eggs 'ere are for his missis there;" and she indicated with her forefinger a basket of beautiful brown eggs. "I made 'im a cake, too; but him went and left it at the railroad, he did."

Mrs. Layton had expected nothing so bad as this, and felt extremely uncomfortable. She therefore expressed her intention of calling some other time, and prepared to cut her visit short.

"Would yer like a rasher or two to take with yer? It's 'ome-cured, and would be nice for yer tea," said the old man, hospitably.

Mrs. Layton made no reply, but bowed slightly, and left the room.

When she had gone, the curate raised his hands to his head, and said in an agonised tone—

"You've ruined me; you've ruined me."

The worthy couple were absolutely aghast at this, and were tempted to believe that their Bruey had taken leave of his senses.

“How could you offer a lady bacon!”

“It would be a treat for anybody,” said the old lady, bridling, “that it would, there; I thought she were a friend on yourn.”

The curate covered his face with his hands, and cried in a wailing tone—

“What did you educate me at all for, if you meant to humble me like this? You ought to have kept away.”

The old people looked at each other, and the father said—

“All right, Bruey;” this in a voice that quavered. “We wunner come any more—we didn’t know as ’ow . . .” but here he broke down, and mopped his eyes vigorously with his check handkerchief.

“Let us kiss the babes first,” said the old woman, her face as white now as it had been ruddy on her entrance.

The mother of the babies here spoke for the first time—

“O Brougham, how can you?” she said; and, taking a hand of each of the old people, she added, in the most persuasive tone, “Please, don’t go. He doesn’t know what he has been saying, and I like you so much;” and here Mrs. Banner, junior, broke down and began to cry.

But the old people were resolved. They had seen the truth. They were not to be entreated now.

“Come, missis,” said the father, taking her trembling hand, “let us go wom.” And the old couple passed out of the room and of the house, leaving behind them, on a chair of the sitting-room, the home-fed bacon and the basket of eggs, silent testimony to their thoughtful care for an ungrateful son.





CHAPTER VII.

BREAKERS AHEAD.

WHEN Keziah reached home from Manchester, she found her lord in no amiable mood. He scarcely greeted her. Wilson, too, looked morose, and could hardly be got to look up at her mistress.

“Where are the children?” Keziah asked her.

“Oh, m’m,” began Wilson, viciously fingering the hem of her apron, and rubbing her foot about on the ground, “I can hardly tell you, indeed I can’t, such a shame as it is, such a burning shame.”

“What is the matter? Speak directly,” said Keziah, growing alarmed and exasperated; “I cannot be kept like this.”

“It’s the master,” said Wilson, looking up for the first time, and with burning eyes.

“What about the master?” said Keziah, growing desperate.

“He’s beaten Bertram,” answered Wilson.

Keziah echoed, “Beaten Bertram? O Wilson, whatever did he beat the child for? Let us go to him at once. When did he beat him? Whatever had he been doing?” As she said these last few sentences, she was walking rapidly upstairs.

“This morning he beat him. And what for? You may well ask, what for? I don’t know. He doesn’t know himself—the brute,” she added involuntarily; “and Bertram’s the best child that ever breathed. His only fault is being too good for them as aren’t no good themselves, and as don’t understand him and don’t love him—the dear lamb!” she concluded, in a tone that suggested abuse of Hack-bit, rather than tenderness towards the child.

In the nursery they found Bertram lying on his face on the floor, fast asleep, his little hands, each clutching a wrist, fixed round his head, and the poor little arms red and wealed.

“This is downright disgraceful,” said Keziah, looking at the child. “Why did you let him go

to sleep there, Wilson?" she added, looking at the nurse.

"The dear lamb would go there, and he wouldn't let nobody go near him when he'd been beat."

Master Hackbit put in his word at this moment, by crowing lustily from the other end of the nursery. Keziah could scarcely notice him, she was so wounded. She knelt down by the sleeping child, and stroked his cheek ever so gently. He started awake with a scream, but he smiled when he saw who it was, and said with a sob, "Mother."

Keziah took him in her arms, and covered his hands, and his arms, and his tear-stained face with kisses. It seemed to her that this was the signal of open war between herself and her husband. She had felt almost ever since their marriage that Hackbit had not really taken kindly to her adopted child; but he had never ill-used him till now. She had never thought he would; and, indeed, the child was not of a nature to provoke ill-treatment, being gentle, obedient, and affectionate. Bertram had been whipped by no one hitherto; and no one but Hackbit had ever made a complaint against him;

even he could only express his disfavour in general terms, and could particularise no fault the child had committed. As Keziah looked at the poor little arms, and the pretty white neck, with the livid raised lines upon them, she thought indignantly that a really wicked child should never be whipped so much as this. Keziah was Keziah still, though trouble had changed her face, and even her manner somewhat. So, with a majestic step, she carried the child out of the room, down the stairs, through the dining-room, into the offices, into which there was a private door of communication.

Her husband was sorting papers and marking them at a table.

“Mr. Hackbit,” said Keziah, in an ominous tone, “I should like to speak to you.”

He had expected Keziah to be angry : but he had scarcely expected her to beard him in his den ; so not being prepared, he was perhaps all the more ruffled.

He faced round in his chair—which had a movable screw, and could face anyway—and remarked with a characteristic sneer that he would be glad

if she would not interrupt him when he was engaged in business.

Keziah's old fiery temper burst forth, in spite of the good resolves she had formed.

"Business or not, you shall hear what I have to say. You're a dastardly coward."

Hackbit's face worked with rage. He was at his wit's end how to reply in words crushing enough.

Seeing that he hesitated, Keziah went on, "I repeat my words, Mr. Hackbit; you are a dastardly coward. Look at this poor child."

Hackbit had found his tongue. "Walk out of this office," he said, pointing steadily at the door with his forefinger.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," replied Keziah, deathly white, but quite firm. "The worst child in the world doesn't merit marks like these; and Bertram is one of the best children that ever lived."

"Keziah," thundered Hackbit, in a terrific passion, "have you brought that child here to talk so before him, to teach him to defy me?"

"I have brought him," retorted Keziah, "that he may see and hear that his mother, at least,

has no part in this shameful wrong that has been done him."

Hackbit, raging violently, found no words to express himself in. It is only those who are in the right that can give true scorn spontaneously. How Joshua Rimmon would have rejoiced, could he have seen his nephew receiving a taste of the anger his daughter had so frequently poured out upon himself.

Hackbit was gnawing his lower lip, and breaking up a quill-pen, but speechless.

"I have one more thing to say," resumed Keziah. "It shall be the worse for you, if you touch this child again," and with this she quitted the office.

When she had gone, a volley of curses broke from her husband, which would not get uttered while she was there ; and while he allowed his passion to draw itself upon his countenance, the ever-smiling face of Mr. Rimpler gazed at him from an outer window. Mr. Rimpler had returned from Manchester, just in time to witness Keziah's exit, and Hackbit's rage.

Entering the office, Rimpler greeted Hackbit as if he had seen nothing ; then affecting suddenly to

discover something wrong in Hackbit's countenance, he asked him if anything had gone wrong.

"D—— you," replied Hackbit; "what's it got to do with you?"

"Oh, nothing," said Rimpler, sniffing, indifferently. "Only ever since I came I have expected you to be in trouble, and have been in a position to throw some light upon it."

Hackbit fixed his eyes keenly upon his clerk, and asked him what he was talking about.

"If you don't know," replied Mr. Rimpler, unflinchingly, "I don't see why I should take the trouble to inform you."

"Do you think I keep you to pry into my affairs?" returned Hackbit.

"Not precisely," said Mr. Rimpler, smiling complacently.

"I will explain your duties to you, as you seem to have forgotten them. I engaged you to be in this office from ten till four, minus dinner-time. Yesterday you absented yourself, without any permission from me."

"I beg your pardon; I told you I was going."

"I certainly never understood you," said Hackbit. "Besides," he added wrathfully, "it's not your place to tell me you are going out."

If Hackbit had had less on his mind at this moment, his clerk would have come off worse. As it was, he walked away at this point; and Rimpler heard him shortly afterwards bang the hall door, and saw him pass the office window, and go up the street in the direction of his father-in-law's.

"Wonder what he's going to do," thought Rimpler, with a very cunning light in his eyes. And he went to his papers and sat down in front of them, but did not work.

"Ah," thought he to himself, "of all the ways of making money, there's none so good as getting into a man's confidence in spite of him. Silence is always up in the market, and will fetch its price when everything else is down."

Mr. Rimpler at this moment happening to look through the window, for no particular reason, saw a lady advancing with mincing steps towards the office-entrance. Her appearance evidently caused him great amusement, for he fairly shook with

laughter, though no sound was emitted by him.

“A client, I suppose,” he thought. “I must compose my countenance. Plenty of cheek, though,” he thought, as the door opened without a knock.

Mr. Rimpler bowed.

“Oh,” said the lady, “I thought my nephew was here. I came to see him.” This was extraordinary, as Miss Dorcas had seen him pass Mr. Rimmon’s house a few minutes before, going in an opposite direction.

“If it is a matter of business, perhaps I can be of service to you,” blandly replied Mr. Rimpler, offering a chair.

“Well, it isn’t exactly business,” said Miss Dorcas, simpering. “Thomas promised to show me his new offices; and I just dropped in to see if it would be convenient this morning.”

“If that is all you require, Madam, I shall have great pleasure in showing you the offices.”

“Thank you, Mr. — I don’t know your name.”

"Rimpler," said the clerk; and he began to show Miss Dorcas the offices in the most affable manner imaginable.

"Do you know these parts much, Mr. Rimpler?" Miss Dorcas inquired.

"Not much; but I've not the pleasure of knowing what to call you."

"My name is Dorcas Rimmon."

"Mrs. or Miss?" asked Mr. Rimpler, who knew the answer perfectly well by her look.

"Miss," Dorcas acknowledged, blushing faintly.

"Ah," said Mr. Rimpler, "I'm glad to hear that."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Miss Dorcas, smiling sweetly upon the clerk.

"Oh, nothing, except that it's agreeable now and then to find that all the handsome women have not been snapped up, and that there are still some left, to be won by those whom fortune may favour. I suppose you knew Mrs. Hackbit before she was married?" went on Mr. Rimpler. "Charming person!"

"Know her!" replied Miss Dorcas, clouding

over directly. "I should think I do know her; but I don't think her charming."

Mr. Rimpler had thrown out a feeler, and discovered what ground he was on; and continued to ply his new acquaintance with questions.

"Well, now," he went on, "I'm surprised that you don't think she's charming. Now, my experience goes to prove that people like Mrs. Hackbit get a hundred chances of marrying, but refuse all for the man they love."

"She has had lots of lovers, but only two offers that I know of," burst forth Miss Dorcas. Mr. Rimpler thought he had never had such easy work before. And the lady, being on this subject, could not refrain from saying that Keziah had been engaged to somebody else, and had broken with him, and then married her cousin out of spite.

"So I suppose," said Mr. Rimpler, "the gentleman she forsook married someone else out of spite?"

"No, he didn't," answered Miss Dorcas; "he's in Leamington now."

Mr. Rimpler referred for a moment to a notebook he had in his hand.

"You're not going to take down what I say?" said Miss Dorcas, alarmed.

"I was only referring," replied Mr. Rimpler, "to see what time I expect a client here to-day; for I fear the time must be near."

"Oh, and I must go," said Miss Dorcas, all in a flutter.

This was what Mr. Rimpler wanted, for he had extracted enough out of her for the time, and he did not desire that anyone should come and find them together, a consideration which appeared to be of no moment whatever to the lady. As Dorcas held out her hand to the clerk by way of taking leave, he touched it with the greatest respect, remarking as he did so that he esteemed it a most fortunate chance which had given him the pleasure of this chat with her, and that he hoped they should meet again.

"Perhaps you will come and see me?" said Miss Dorcas, taking the bait instantly.

"I should much like to do so," replied Mr. Rimpler gravely, "if an opportunity occurs." And he decided mentally to make an opportunity.

Dorcas was about to leave through the door she had entered by. But it occurred to her that, for the sake of keeping up appearances, it might be as well to go into the house and see Keziah. So she passed into the house, and went to the nursery, where she supposed Keziah would be.

Keziah looked up wearily as she entered, and said, "Well, aunt?" in a tone that might mean anything.

Noticing a travelling-bag on the nursery table, Dorcas asked Keziah who was going away.

"Nobody," replied Keziah. "I have just come back from Manchester."

"I never knew you'd been there," said Miss Dorcas, offended instantly.

"Uncle David telegraphed for me," continued Keziah, in the tone she had used at first. "Poor grandmamma's dead."

"Well, I never knew such a nuisance," said Miss Dorcas after a very brief pause. "I've just been and bought everything new; and now to have to go in black—it's shameful! Why couldn't she go and die before I bought my things, or else wait till I have to buy the winter ones?"

A snort from Wilson caught Miss Rimmon's attention at this point, and she said, in a manner meant to be satirical, "Has that woman got a cold in her head?"

"No, ma'am, thank you," said Wilson, speaking for herself, "I have not a cold in my head. But I'd rather have ten million colds in my head than have what some people seem to have in theirs, and in their hearts, too, for that matter."

The full weight of this remark was lost on Miss Dorcas, owing to her not understanding it. But she knew it was meant to be insulting; and she said to Keziah that she wondered how she could keep such a creature as that Wilson.

"I know my own business without your interference," she replied.

"Well, you needn't be so snappish," retorted her aunt, who then added affably, "What a nice young man you have in the office now."

"Well, he's not very young," replied Keziah, smiling; "and as for his being nice, I don't think he's that either."

"Oh, it's always the way," said Miss Dorcas:

“if ever I like anybody, you always turn against them.”

“You must have got up a liking for him pretty soon,” was Keziah’s amused comment; “you can’t have seen him many times.”

“Once is quite enough to teach us to like some people,” asserted Miss Dorcas.

Had she known what Mr. Rimpler was thinking about her at this moment, she might have spared some of her eulogiums on him; for he was thinking, “Of all the fools I ever knew in my life, that woman is the biggest.”





CHAPTER VIII.

A SUBTLE WORKMAN.



JOSHUA RIMMON was placed in a most awkward position by his mother's death, following as it did upon his quarrel with his brother. David had been too much hurt to let him know of his mother's illness; but decency demanded that he should be informed of her death, and be invited to her funeral, as her eldest son.

Joshua's first feeling on reading this news, which arrived the same morning that Keziah returned to Jumley, was one of downright relief that his brother had spared his reputation so far as to ask him to the funeral; and for appearance sake he resolved to go

to Manchester, and swallow that bitter draught, as he had done many another for the same reason.

Having decided what to do, Mr. Rimmon announced the death to his wife in a manner quite in character.

“Ann,” he said, addressing her, “put the blinds down.”

That meek person having once looked into his face, saw reason for not asking him any question, and concluded in her own mind that his mother was dead. And having put the blinds down, and seen her lord off the premises, she went down to Keziah.

“Strange,” she thought, as she approached the house, “these blinds are not down ;” and in truth it had never occurred to Keziah to have them put down.

On her entrance, Keziah at once said to her mother, “I suppose Uncle David has sent you word about poor grandmamma.”

“Why, no, my dear,” replied Mrs. Rimmon. “At least he has, I think,” she corrected herself. “Your father told me to put the blinds down. Poor soul!

It's a happy release for her, I should think. When we get old," she went on, "and we find one thing after another turn out nothing, and all the ways leading to nowhere, we begin to look for death, and to want it."

Keziah begged her mother to stay with her the remainder of the day; but she could not do that, Mr. Rimmon's dinner was too all-important.

Keziah did not go down to a meal that day. She sat and sewed in the nursery. She thought the hours would never wear away, and it would never be dark. She had never even told her husband that their grandmother was dead.

Ten o'clock: Wilson went down to her supper. Eleven o'clock: Wilson went to bed. And still Keziah sat in the nursery and sewed. Twelve o'clock came; and some time after it had struck, Keziah went outside the nursery door and listened over the banisters. She could hear her husband's voice and that of Mr. Rimpler.

At last she heard her husband's voice rise in a strange manner, sounding quite unlike his usual voice. She went a few steps downstairs and listened

again. Her blood froze. She could not doubt it now. Her husband was drunk.

Hardly knowing what she did, she went down and opened the dining-room door. Yes; she was not mistaken. There sat the lawyer and his clerk, with an empty bottle between them. Hackbit was uncorking another. Both men were highly excited.

Sick at heart, Keziah went out. Neither of them had noticed her. "Oh," she thought, "what a horrible future begins for me this night." And she stole upstairs, and waited till the grey dawn broke; and then and not till then, Hackbit with unsteady footsteps mounted the stairs.

When Hackbit's bedroom door had shut behind him, Mr. Rimpler mounted. His step was not at all unsteady. Emphatically Mr. Rimpler was not drunk, unless it were with pleasure at the success of his own mode of procedure. When inside his bedroom he placed his candle upon the dressing-table, sat down in front of it and contemplated himself in the glass, and looked highly satisfied with his appearance.

"There's a face," he said to himself, "that won't

reflect the heart even when we are by ourselves. A pattern face, that won't even trust me." And having treated himself to this piece of amusement, Mr. Rimpler took out his note-books and arranged them in front of him. They were beautifully kept, on a perfect system, so that Mr. Rimpler had no difficulty at all in turning to any particular thing.

"R, S, T," he said to himself, turning the leaves of one pocket-book. He stopped at T, and conned his notes. "Towers: strictly non-committal. Wasn't to be led away by my pretending to know. Must lay a trap for Heinrich. Must have seen Towers when I was a medical student in Germany, or some one else vastly like him." And here Silas chuckled to himself as he thought that only he and his sole confidant, namely himself, knew anything about his ever having been a medical student. In fact there were quite enough reasons for his not wishing it to be known.

Whatever Mr. Rimpler's game might be, he understood it. If he did confidential work for people, and these people chose for some reason to

keep him in the dark, even while he was acting for them, he saw at once something worth his sifting, and sifted it; and at this present moment, he was the secret agent of many respectable people who had things to keep dark. Among them was a certain Herr Heinrich, occupying a very responsible position in London, from whom he had the order to receive £100 from Towers, on the day we have seen him in Manchester. Mr. Rimpler therefore felt it was to his interest to get to understand the why and the wherefore of this transaction between Heinrich and Towers, and he tried what he termed "Plan No. 1," that is, he pretended to know all about the matter, and endeavoured to lead Towers on into stating the case. Towers, as the extract above given shows, had not fallen into the trap. Had it not been for personal reasons, Mr. Rimpler would have proceeded on his next visit to young Towers, to assure him that he had met him in Germany. As Rimpler's knowing Towers would imply Towers' knowing Rimpler, and perhaps being informed of circumstances which had better not see the light, Mr. Rimpler chose not to play this card.

Besides, he could remember nothing against Towers in Germany.

Mr. Rimpler shut that note-book up, and looked for H in another book. Under the head of "Hackbit" was written—"Another man's agent for money-lending business. Must find out who that man is. Strongly suspect father-in-law." He added to this in pencil—"From what he let fall to-night when drunk, I am sure it is his father-in-law."

He closed the book, and said to himself, "What fools men are to drink. Hackbit's as close as anybody when he's sober. A man who does our work, Hackbit's and mine, should never drink. He daren't turn me away now; to-morrow I shall apply for more money."

Mr. Rimpler now put his light out, but did not begin to undress. It was one of his peculiarities that he could exist with very little sleep. When he had had two hours' rest, he felt as fresh as most men who have had six. But he always retired to his room at the same hours as the people he was with, and never mentioned the fact of his sleeping so short a time. It was a kind of religion with Mr. Rimpler

to tell nothing he was not obliged to tell, however trivial it might seem ; for he held that it was impossible to judge what things were or were not important. It was for this reason that Mr. Rimpler's light was put out, after he thought a reasonable time had elapsed. But having put the light out, Mr. Rimpler drew the blind up, and stationed himself comfortably by the window. This he had done every night since he had been an inmate of the house. He watched by way of occupation. Something might happen. In any case, his time was not wasted, for he could think ; and perhaps this thinking was Mr. Rimpler's strongest point. The time most men spend in trivial actions, Mr. Rimpler spent in carefully thinking out his courses of action.

He was now in the possession of a handsome sum of money, all of it hush-money. He had been paid out of the last firm in which he had been a partner, and chose to come as clerk to Mr. Hackbit, though quite qualified to act on his own account as a solicitor. Mr. Rimpler speculated in situations, and up to the present was always on the winning side. So well had he managed his affairs, that *bonâ-fide*

testimonials of the utmost value, from most respectable firms, were in his possession. When he should have fleeced Hackbit, he should have a testimonial from him, he thought.

The reader will judge that Mr. Rimpler had not failed to note Keziah's parting with Elworthy. He saw and took in the situation at once, and perceived in it another chance for himself to make money. But he never plucked fruit till it was ripe ; and he decided within himself that this man whom he had seen with Mrs. Hackbit would certainly come again to the house ; he also decided that he would see him whenever he might come.

Dorcas had entered into and helped him in this part of his business. She had confirmed his suspicions. He had been highly amused by Hackbit's anger at his absenting himself without permission. But he never took a liberty of this kind until he had made his footing quite secure ; and he had not been three days in the establishment before his position with Hackbit was sure, though the latter knew nothing about it.

The most acute person in that house, in Rimpler's

opinion, was Wilson ; and he accordingly guarded himself against her. His method was this : he was as rude as he could be to her on all occasions. He knew very well that, if he were polite to Wilson, her suspicion of him would be increased.

It may interest the reader to know something of the origin of so strange a person as Silas Rimpler. He was born and bred in no marble halls, but in a marine store-shop kept by his father in a certain low quarter of London ; and there Silas had passed his early years, and had seen his father grow rich.

And while Silas Rimpler watched, James Elworthy, moth-like, came to burn himself at his mistress's candle. In others words, the foolish fellow had come to look at the casket that held his lost treasure.





CHAPTER IX.

MADELINE.



ONE morning about the time of fruit harvest, Mrs. Saltring received a letter from Laura, on which Mr. Saltring made a running comment as he read it, thus:—

“So Jubal is really gone to the mills with his uncle,” was his first comment. “And old Mrs. Rimmon’s dead; and” . . . he read some more in silence, then looked at his wife, and remarked, “Well, if this doesn’t beat all. First, Joshua Rimmon quarrels with his brother and Jubal, and vows never to speak to either of them again; and after that he has the cheek to come to stay in the house, to go to the funeral, and never open his

mouth to Jubal the whole time, though they stood side by side over the open grave. I call it disgraceful."

"Oh, here's something interesting," he said, after reading another page. "David Rimmon has made a will in favour of Jubal, since his father has given him up, and Keziah is provided for."

"I can't make out how it is Laura knows all this," remarked Mrs. Saltring, "for she told us in your last letter, if you remember, that Mr. and Mrs. Towers never visited their next-door neighbours, and had no communication with them."

"Oh, she must meet Jubal," said the father, "and hear it from him; what is more natural?" And, truly, it did seem natural enough. But it would have surprised them if they had known that the Towers's never heard Laura mention Jubal's name except in the most indifferent manner, and had no idea that she met him anywhere.

"There's no more of importance in the letter," observed Mr. Saltring, "except that Laura is coming home in a day or two. Quite time she did. She has been there too long already. In my

opinion, guests should always leave a house while the host is still pressing them to stop."

The time of gathering fruit was an especially festive one at the Saltrings'. The members of the household, with one accord, assembled in the orchard; and the little folks carried out all their belongings and abandoned the nursery. All the children, and Mrs. Saltring herself, wore pretty print dresses; and rugs and seats and small tables, needlework-stands, and some light literature, all found a place under the loaded trees. The groom, and two or three little boys who came to help and to fill their stomachs and pockets, mounted the ladders placed under the trees, and the children of the house held the baskets. No meal was to be taken within doors to-day; all were to abandon themselves to gipsy life. The baby, who could now run about, stood with a tiny toy basket under an apple-tree, and received a single apple, which he carried to the big basket and emptied solemnly, and then as solemnly returned for another. Mrs. Saltring's post was a vague one. She was there

under a general pretence of keeping order, but in reality she plied her needle, and smiled on her offspring and enjoyed herself. When dinner-time came, every child helped to carry something out—either a plate or a glass or some other requisite, the spoons being reserved for baby to carry. A wooden kitchen-table was placed under a tree, and upon it dinner was laid. When Mr. Saltring arrived on the scene, everybody's spirits went up. The baby insisted on having his high chair at papa's elbow, and having bits from papa's fork; while his bigger brothers looked with some contempt upon this infantile proceeding. Harry and his big brother Ted, who has been only once before alluded to, patronised the whole company.

Dinner was nearly over, when Edmond happened to turn his head in the direction of the orchard gate. Leaning on it was a girl, dressed in black, and having a straw-hat upon her head, totally untrimmed; from under the hat masses of wavy light hair hung in a kind of disorder. Her great violet eyes stared at the food like those of a famished dog. She only stood there, and did not attempt to speak.

“Father,” said Ted, “look at that girl.”

Everybody looked. Mr. and Mrs. Saltring rose simultaneously, and went towards the gate. The girl appeared to wake up as they approached, and darted away like a wild thing.

“Go after her quick, Sam, do,” said Mrs. Saltring. “She looked starving.” And in very truth she did.

Mr. Saltring had not far to go before he overtook the girl, for she had sunk down in the narrow lane that had led her to the orchard, utterly unable to proceed farther. As Mr. Saltring approached her, she waved him back gently; but he was not to be put off; and Mrs. Saltring, who followed closely in her husband’s wake, added her word.

“You look tired, my dear,” she said, in her motherly manner. “Come and join us at the table; take some refreshment.”

The girl made no movement.

“You must come,” Mrs. Saltring insisted; “and you will be more able to go home when you have had something.”

“Go home!” exclaimed the girl, with wide-open

eyes. "I have no home. Go away, and let me die."

"Bless my heart alive," said Mr. Saltring, taking hold of her by main force, "then you are coming in." And he half led, half carried her, till he had placed her in the chair Mrs. Saltring had just quitted, while that lady began tempting her with food.

She could scarcely eat at all, and Mrs. Saltring could with difficulty refrain from crying as she saw how terribly wasted she was. The girl saw her sympathy, and, letting her head fall on her hands, began to weep convulsively.

"Oh!" she sobbed, "you're too kind; you don't know who you're kind to; let me go away."

Mrs. Saltring, by way of answer, put her arm round the girl's shoulder, and laid her soft cheek against the pallid and wasted one of the stranger.

The girl continued to sob, and said, in broken accents, "Let me go. It's harder to starve when you've been fed again."

"But you shan't starve," said Mrs. Saltring. "Do you think we've no feeling? You're in

trouble, my dear. You must stay with us until you can see your way to go back to your friends."

Mrs. Saltring spoke in this manner, for there was something in the girl's demeanour which bespoke her the gentlewoman in spite of her shabby dress.

"You must tell me your name, and all about yourself, just as if you had known me always."

They were quite alone, for Master Ted—"Mister" he much preferred being called, being a sixth form boy—had cleared everybody off the scene.

"I can't tell you now," said the girl. "Call me Madeline. I believe you are an angel. Is it all true? Oh, the things I have seen! What I have gone through! It makes me think I am dreaming now."

"The darkest hour comes before the dawn, my dear," said Mrs. Saltring. Looking up, she saw her husband coming through the orchard gate, with a cup of tea in his hand.

"Tea!" cried Madeline, looking up. "Oh, how I have longed for tea! In the barn last night I dreamed I had some." She drank it, hot as it was, and her face flushed, and she looked at Mrs. Saltring

in a manner that caused that lady to start, and assume a far-away look, as if trying to recall something or somebody.

That night, while the poor wayfarer was comfortably lodged in Laura's empty room, and Mr. and Mrs. Saltring had retired for the night, the latter said to her husband—

“Tell me, Sam, whom does this girl remind you of?”

“It's puzzling in the extreme,” he responded. “I can hardly believe it, and yet there is no doubt of it. She does remind me of Keziah's foster-baby.”

“And me, too,” said Mrs. Saltring. “What a strange thing!”

“How glad I am she came to our house!” observed Mr. Saltring. “If she had not had shelter this night, I fear it would have been her last. And what has God given us our home for, if not to shelter the wretched when they are sent to us?”



CHAPTER X.

MR. RIMMON IS STUNG.



T was late in November, and Jumley lay overshadowed and hedged in by a murky cloak of cloud and fog. It was evening; and Mr. Rimmon, seated in his own dining-room, with the curtains close drawn, and a Black Country fire burning, that is, a good big one, and a bright lamp upon the table, was not sensible of the discomfort without. A quantity of books lay upon the table, all of them new; and in the fly-leaf was pasted a card on which was printed, "Jumley Wesleyan Sunday School: Round O Class."

Mr. Rimmon was engaged in writing names on these cards, and beneath the name the number of years the scholar had neither missed Sunday School nor been late. Any member of the Round O who had been one moment late during the year got no prize, and had to begin the reckoning over again from the following Round O meeting, which was considered an overpowering disgrace.

Now all the members of Mr. Rimmon's Bible Class were also Round O members of the Sunday School, and to these Mr. Rimmon himself gave the prizes. The Round O had first been started in Jumley in November. Therefore the same date, as it recurred, witnessed a Round O celebration, which consisted of a tea-drinking, at 4.30, in the Sunday School, to which any one was admitted on payment of one shilling; and of a public meeting after tea, in the adjoining chapel, where many speeches were made on the subject of the Round O; after which the prizes were distributed to the successful Round O-ists, usually by the minister of the chapel.

Mr. Rimmon was a Round O teacher, and had been so for eighteen years without missing, which was

longer than anyone in Jumley : and Mr. Rimmon was thinking about this fact as he wrote the names of the scholars in the prize-books.

While he was thus occupied, the minister of his congregation, the Rev. Wilson Gray, dropped in to ask a question in reference to the meeting which was to come off next day.

Mr. Rimmon rose to receive Mr. Gray in his most affable manner, and begged him to take the chair nearest the fire. The minister sat down, and asked after Mrs. Rimmon, who was not in the room.

“She will be here directly, and will be delighted to see you.”

Mr. Gray, dressed in simple black, with a white tie, and a grey silky beard, cropped rather short, a pale sympathetic face, grey earnest eyes, and scanty grey hair, sat for a moment or two breathing rather heavily, and leaning wearily back in his chair.

“Ah, Mr. Gray,” remarked Mr. Rimmon, “Jumley doesn’t agree with your weak heart.”

“Someone must be at Jumley,” answered the minister with a patient smile, “and why not I?”

“But there are plenty of places, and plenty of

ministers," rejoined Mr. Rimmon. "I am sure this place can't suit you."

"I scarcely think it a healthy place for anybody," said Mr. Gray. "And it is best that I should come to it; for I have no children to endanger, and my dear wife being taken from me, there is only myself, and I prefer the harder places. I came specially to-night," he went on, as if to throw off the subject, "to know where Mr. Hawksworth will sleep after the meeting. I shall be glad to offer him a bed, unless someone else wishes to have him. I thought perhaps you would know."

"If you can take him," replied Mr. Rimmon, "I think it would be a convenience, as I know several of the people who usually entertain, have got sickness in the house just now."

Mr. Rimmon was so utterly unaccustomed to exercise hospitality himself, that it did not enter his head that he and not the minister should have received the stranger.

"That is all I wanted to know," said Mr. Gray, "and I see you are busy. I must not interrupt you."

"Oh," said Mr. Rimmon, waving his hand

towards the table, "I was merely writing the names in the prize-books. I have plenty of time to finish them; Mrs. Rimmon will be here in a moment, and she will like to see you."

As he spoke, Mrs. Rimmon entered. She glanced nervously at her husband and then at his visitor, who shook her heartily by the hand, and asked her how she was.

It was always a treat to Mrs. Rimmon when Mr. Gray dropped in; he was so cheery and kindly, and did not seem to look down upon her. He had been but a year in Junley, and would in all probability remain two more, according to the three years' system prevailing among the Wesleyans.

Mrs. Rimmon's name was upon Mr. Gray's society class-book, but since his advent he had not seen her once at the class. He never severely pressed her to attend, but sometimes told her how glad he should be to see her if she came. He was really anxious about it at heart, because to his mind she did not look happy; and he honestly believed that the class-meeting was a great means of increasing happiness. He had found it so himself, he

told Mrs. Rimmon ; and their great founder Wesley had strongly believed in it.

Poor Mrs. Rimmon felt her life to be false, and herself under a ban ; but she was convinced that she could not go and listen to the confessions of honest strivers after a higher life without in the end unburdening her soul of its load ; so she kept away, though her name had always been on the book as a member of the minister's class, whatever minister might be in residence.

To-night Mr. Gray said, " We are still hoping to see you some Wednesday evening, Mrs. Rimmon."

" I haven't much time to spare," Mrs. Rimmon replied, faintly, without daring to look up.

" Won't you try and make time ?" said Mr. Gray earnestly. " I wouldn't ask you if I didn't believe it would make you happier. You see the world is so far from God, it cannot understand God's people ; and they are happier for meeting together to talk over the life they are trying to lead, and the happy future before them."

" I'm not good enough to come," replied Mrs. Rimmon, still ever so faintly.

"We are none of us good when compared with Christ," said the minister; "but do not let anything deter you."

"I think I will come," said Mrs. Rimmon, glancing at her husband with a hunted look. He was not looking up at all.

Mr. Gray rose, tied a white muffler round his throat, put on a respirator, and took his leave.

As soon as he had left the house, Mr. Rimmon turned upon his wife, and asked her in a towering passion what she meant by playing the fool.

She trembled violently, but made no answer.

"Don't you know you madden me?" said Joshua, glancing at her, "when you look at me, as you do, when people are here, as if you were afraid of me; as if I were some ogre."

"You have made me afraid of you, Joshua," said Mrs. Rimmon in a gasping way; "and I'm always afraid to speak when you are here."

"Why don't you go to the class like other people do?"

"What can I say if I go there? If I told the truth, Joshua, I should have to say . . ."

“Stuff and nonsense!” broke in Mr. Rimmon.
“Do you think any of the people at the classes tell their real feelings?”

“I am sure they do, Joshua.”

“Well, they’re not obliged to,” replied Joshua, wrathfully.

“And I don’t think I can go. There would be two . . .”

“Two what?” broke in her husband, determined to make her finish her sentence.

“Oh, please, don’t make me say,” pleaded Mrs. Rimmon, “I beg of you.”

“You shall say,” said Mr. Rimmon; and he took hold of his wife’s wrist, and stared into her face till she felt as if she shrank up. “Two what?” he said right in her ear.

“Oh, don’t be so angry, Joshua.”

“I will tell you what you meant,” he replied; “two impostors instead of one, you were going to say. Now, once for all, if you do make any confessions on your own account, keep my name out of it, or it will be the worse for you. If you have thoughts, keep them to yourself.” And, having

said his say, he turned to his books, and went on writing the names as if nothing had occurred, while his wife sat as if frozen up, looking into the fire. It was the first time her husband had owned himself an impostor to her ; and now that he had owned it, it looked like the beginning of the end. He had surprised her secret mistrust of him, and had in no way defended himself. He had torn down part of the veil. When would he tear down the rest, and show himself to the world ?





CHAPTER XI.

THE SERPENT'S TONGUE.

THINGS did not improve at The Hollies after Keziah's visit. Maud and her husband were on worse terms every day; and as it was not in Maud's nature to hide the true state of affairs, the fact was patent to the whole household, and, indeed, to more of the neighbourhood than might be imagined, considering how few acquaintances the family had.

Maud made some effort to get rid of Laura after Keziah's advice, but Laura opened her big, innocent eyes, and begged Maud not to send her away yet, for it was so dreadfully dull at home. Maud told her that it could not be duller anywhere

for her than at The Hollies ; but Laura protested that she enjoyed being there, and hoped they would let her stay a little longer. Of course, after this, she had *carte blanche* to stay as long as she liked.

Maud had contracted a habit of taking long walks between lunch and dinner ; and in these walks Laura never accompanied her, though Maud always gave her the opportunity of doing so. Laura did not like long walks ; she would rather read, if Mrs. Towers did not object.

On one dreary afternoon, during a dense fog, Maud was out, and Laura was wandering in the garden, which was now dank with decaying leaves. She paced backwards and forwards impatiently by the hedge that divided this garden from David Rimmon's. It was a Saturday, and Jubal would be at home early, and had promised to come and speak with her as soon as he returned.

Jubal was later than usual, and Laura feared Maud would be back before she should have had time to speak to Jubal. But no ; at last she heard his footstep on the fallen and wet leaves. She

moved to a part of the hedge which was low enough for her to see over.

"Why didn't you come before, Jack?" she asked.

"I couldn't."

"Another time I shan't wait," was the young lady's response. "I've a very good mind to go home on Monday, because you've kept me waiting so."

"I tell you I couldn't help it," repeated Jubal sharply; "it's not my fault if people come to look over the mills, and I have to go over with them and uncle."

"Oh, that alters the case," said Laura, "so I'll forgive you. How much property did you tell me your uncle had?" she added, in the same breath.

"Don't let's talk about that," said Jubal; "it's not interesting."

"Oh, yes, it is," Laura insisted; "I love to talk about property, especially when you are to have it all."

"It will be yours, too, if you marry me," said Jubal.

"*If*," rejoined Laura.

"But you will, you know you will; you promised me."

"I shan't marry anybody who can't let me have a carriage to ride in."

"You shall have a carriage, and you shall have everything, Laura, if you marry me."

"But perhaps somebody else will give me a carriage and marry me before you are out of your time and are old enough to marry me," said Laura spitefully.

"If you do have anyone else than me, Laura, he shan't have you long, for I'd make an end of him."

"You daren't," said Laura; "you haven't pluck enough."

"That you don't know," retorted Jubal, between his teeth. "I'm not the kid you used to know, and so he'd find out. . . . But there's somebody coming in the garden," he added, and went away immediately.

The somebody was on Laura's side of the hedge. It was the master of the house. He had evidently not seen Laura. He seemed quite absorbed, and

walked with a slow, unheeding step up and down a path.

Laura had a curiosity that was perfectly daring in its character, and she really enjoyed seeing people suffer. The same instinct that makes some boys stone cats and dogs, made Laura touch with terrible precision the wounded spots in human hearts, just for the pleasure of seeing them writhe. And noting an opportunity for her favourite sport, she overtook Towers, and in her candid way said—

“I don’t think Maud means to be unkind to you. Don’t be unhappy.”

The speech sounded innocent enough; and Towers looked gratefully at her, for he thought, “Here is a child that cannot understand, but nevertheless sympathises.” So he took her hand and placed it on his arm, glad of her company, glad to get away from himself.

“No,” he said, echoing her words. “Maud doesn’t mean to be unkind.”

“Still,” continued Laura, as if with a little hesitation, and in a very innocent tone indeed, “if she really loved you like some wives love their husbands,

in books, she would not make you miserable as she does."

The girl's words awoke a dormant thought within Towers—a thought he had drugged to sleep. Maud must have lost her love for him. If that were true . . .

Yet he went on, with a ghastly attempt to appear to be chatting without an object. "Still, different people have different ways of showing their love."

"I don't think they talk against people they love, to other people," remarked Laura, still very innocently; "in books, I mean."

"But Maud doesn't talk to anybody against me," replied Towers, thinking within himself, "This child little knows what hangs on her answer."

The "child" knew very well what she was doing, however, and continued to probe the wound; so she said, raising her childish eyes wide-open and direct, "Maud does."

"To whom?" asked Towers, feeling himself to vibrate.

"She talked against you to Keziah, when she

was here. And she watches you, too ; and she saw you meet that man ; so did Mrs. Hackbit."

Towers stood still in the path, and said nothing. He felt like some have felt when they have wandered too far and the rising tide has cut off their retreat homewards. There is nothing for them but the dreadful waiting for the cruel waves that draw nearer every minute.

Laura prattled on. "I don't know what Maud thinks you do, but I believe she sets people to watch you, and she looks in your pockets when you are out. She opened your desk and looked over that. She says she can't think what you do with all your money. And women can't know what men want money for, can they, Mr. Towers ? Mamma always says that men know their own business best, and that women had much better not interfere ; and it is silly of Maud. If she didn't torment you, you'd tell her all about it, shouldn't you, Mr. Towers ? But of course you won't, when she's always vexing you. If I were your wife," went on Laura, more innocently than ever, "I shouldn't want you to tell me what you didn't want to."

Her words thrilled through Towers, who was like a drowning man catching at a straw. This child, then, believed in him. How sweet it was to be believed in, when everything was lost, even the love of the woman bound to him for life. With a deep and bitter resolution in his heart, urged on by a yet deeper despair, he kissed Laura's forehead, and called her a good little girl, and told her that when she should grow up she might have a husband who would love her. And the vain creature thought within herself. "He would much rather have had me than Maud:" and found the thought highly gratifying.

At this point in the conversation, Maud was seen entering the gate. Laura went to her, but Tom stayed where he was, moody and morose. "If she doesn't spare my reputation, why should I spare hers? It must be quite true; she can't love me." And a bitter smile came on his face as he thought, "I will give myself up, and brand her." Then he thought, "I will die qualified. A few more weeks, and I shall have my qualification, unless the fates thwart me in that as in so much else. And as she is

so curious, she shall know—yes, she shall know what luxuries I have spent her money in. She shall look into Bluebeard's chamber, and pay the cost." He felt nothing but bitterness against Maud, and not a fragment of the old affection that had so stirred him before he won her. His whole mind was conscious now of only one feeling; it was hatred. He hated Maud. He hated his uncle, for being better than he was. He hated his aunts, for their meek faces, and their shabby gowns, worn for his sake. He hated all qualified medical men. He hated David Rimmon, for looking so complacent as he passed home to his wifeless house. He hated the servants, because they could sleep at night and carry light hearts in the day. He hated Keziah, for being the confidante of his wife. He hated those who made money demands upon him. He hated one dead man, the cause of this. He hated himself, God-forsaken as he was. Yes, he hated all the world, unless, perhaps, it might be Laura, who was not old enough, nor quick-witted enough, to be spoilt by the world yet.

In the meantime, this one little exception to his

universal hatred was talking to his wife, who was removing her walking-dress, and preparing for dinner.

“Mr. Towers looks very unhappy,” Laura began.
“He says he knows you don’t love him a bit.”

She could proceed no further with Maud, who refused to listen. But the work was done.

“So,” she thought, “he has been talking to this child, has he, about me?” And she froze against the man she had promised to love.





CHAPTER XII.

WHICH WILL BE STRONGER?



R. HACKBIT stuck to Mr. Rimmon's business affairs with the utmost devotion. He resigned himself to doing without holidays, but certainly not out of consideration for Mr. Rimmon; which fact no doubt he communicated to his uncle, as it was his habit to do, if a fact were disagreeable. Jubal being disinherited, Hackbit was quite sure of the property falling into his hands; and Mr. Rimmon was rapidly growing very rich. No false move on Hackbit's part should mar his future; and for this reason he upheld his uncle's virtuous character on all occasions.

But while he did this, he felt under no obligation to reflect additional lustre upon the family by being virtuous himself, or appearing to be so. He never entered a place of worship under any circumstances; and he and Mr. Rimpler passed the hours of Sunday in ways best known to themselves, for it was usually in company. Keziah always went to chapel at least once on a Sunday; and the rest of the day she spent with her children, or visiting the sick.

She drooped more and more under the suppression and anxiety of her life. She endured the future in addition to the present, being filled with dread both for herself and her children, more especially for poor Bertram. She almost wished now that she had let Maud have him at first; but having grown continually fonder of him since her marriage, she felt she could not now bear to part with him. She never left the house without taking the children, or at any rate Bertram, with her; and one Saturday afternoon, in fact, the same Saturday on which Laura had made so much mischief between Maud and her husband, Keziah, having occasion to go to Birmingham, had ordered Bertram to be dressed to

go too. The child was in a state of high glee; to go out with his mother was the greatest joy he had. But while Wilson was putting on his gaiters, his foster-father came in.

He simply glanced at what was going on, then went to where Keziah was dressing. "Why do you always drag that boy about with you?" he said insolently, to his wife, who was tying her bonnet on.

Keziah saw herself flush in the glass. She did not offer any reply.

"I'd be ashamed to be always seen about with the child, while your own is left at home."

"It is safe to leave the other one at home," retorted Keziah, scornfully, "for he is yours."

"Well, I'm master here," Hackbit asserted, still more insolently, "and Bertram shall not go, unless Leonard goes."

"You may be master here," replied Keziah, turning defiantly to him, with hot cheeks, "but I shall disobey you in this case. It's no weather to take Leonard. But I understand your motive quite well. You only want to annoy me." Then with a mighty effort suppressing her anger, she looked

pleadingly at her husband with those beautiful, touching eyes, and said in a voice which was always like music when she was not angry, "Do let us try to get on well together, Thomas. I never willingly vex you. You know I am passionate. In pity try not to rouse my passion."

"What a fool you are!" exclaimed Hackbit.

"I may appear so to eyes blinded by drink," replied Keziah, flashing out again, her gentler mood forsaking her in a moment, at his hard words. "You shall find me no fool, I promise you. I was a fool to marry you," she added. "Reformed rakes make the best husbands, they say; and that may be quite true; but when do rakes ever reform? I tell you, Thomas Hackbit," she said, stamping her little foot, "don't goad me on. I don't mind appearances, and the world may say just what it chooses. I am not going to stay under your roof, and smile, and pretend to be happy, like some women would. Go a little further, and I shall leave the place. I've earned my living once, and I can do it again."

"Ha, ha," laughed Mr. Hackbit. "The law would have something to say about that."

“I know the laws are made by men,” said Keziah, “and are all against women. But no law should bring me back to you, if once I left you. So you shall make me comfortable, or I shall go.”

Nothing could have surprised Hackbit more than this. It was the last thing he would have thought of Keziah’s doing, for she had borne so much from him since their marriage; and he knew she meant what she said. He went away, grinding his teeth, and thinking within himself, “The old devil her father was right, then; I have caught a Tartar.”

When Keziah had gone, Mr. Hackbit adjourned to the dining-room, and calling in Mr. Rimpler, uncorked some brandy. And after he had taken a couple of glasses, he said to him—

“You were never married, were you, Rimpler?”

“Well, not precisely,” replied that gentleman, looking inquiringly into Mr. Hackbit’s face.

“I’ll answer for it, you were never in love,” said Hackbit.

“Ha, ha,” laughed the non-committive Rimpler.

“Shows your sense,” went on Hackbit, taking

this for assent. "Women are all right when you're on the right side of them; but rub 'em up the wrong way, and they turn into fiends. Makes me sick to hear men talk about women," continued Mr. Hackbit, drinking more brandy: "the gentle wives and tender mothers of romances. It's all a pack of stuff and nonsense. They're not gentle wives, nor tender mothers. They're selfishness personified. That's my opinion of women."

"It sounds strange to hear a married man talk so," insinuated Mr. Rimpler, "with such a bright example by his side of the opposite to his theories."

"Bright example be ——," burst out Hackbit, drinking more; "she's no bright example. She's infernally like the others, only sharper. I wish my wife was at the bottom of the sea; and the confounded brat with her."

"The brat's all right," remarked Rimpler. "To tell you the truth, I like the child, and it isn't often I like anything. But there's the office-bell;" and Mr. Rimpler got up and left Hackbit to finish his bottle of brandy; and thought within himself,

“He’ll be ripe to hear something by to-night, I should say.”

When night came, Keziah had not returned; she had gone in to her father’s, Hackbit supposed. But as a matter of fact, she had not reached Jumley. After having made her purchases in Birmingham, she walked down Union Passage, to see the shops. This passage is always rather dark, as those who know it will remember; so much so, that Keziah could see her own reflection in the shop windows, when she was not directly looking at the objects.

She stood for some time before a shop where ivory goods of every description were displayed; and as she looked she suddenly observed the reflection of her old lover beside her own on the window-glass. A glad smile broke on her face, which was also reflected in the same mirror. She turned round and faced the original.

He did not look so angry as on the only other occasion on which they had met, and she hoped he would not pass without saying something kind. She

was very white, but she held out her hand to him, and said very touchingly—

“Don’t go away, Rupert, without saying a little kind word.”

“Why, Kizzy!” he said, so much in his old tone that for the moment it almost transferred her into the past, when they had been all to each other, “you are looking very white and very thin. Come with me and have some wine.”

She hesitated, and he said with a faint smile, “You needn’t object, Keziah. I would do as much for anyone I saw looking so weary as you look, for I’m a doctor.”

And then for the first time noticing the child by her side, he said, “Is this the little child you adopted?”

She assented, gazing into his face as if to drink in the look of him, the dear aspect for ever in her mind. “Oh,” she thought, “if he were nearer, and I could only see him pass once every day, I should never be so miserable!” and without thinking what she did, she said, plaintively, “It does me good to see you, so much good; I don’t

think I should be so miserable if I could see you sometimes."

Miserable! The girl he would have died to make happy! Then she *was* miserable. The thought fired his soul.

"And would it do you good to see me, Kizzy?" he said, very gently and pityingly. "Then why shouldn't you see me sometimes? There would be no wrong in that."

"O Rupert," said Keziah, with the old light in her eyes, "now that we have met, and quite by accident, we can explain, can't we? We shall never meet again. It cannot be wrong, just to explain."

Elworthy felt that explanations should be out of the question, and would be dangerous; but could he tell her so now, with her lovely eyes looking at him, and her innocent tones appealing to him? He would be a cur to do it, he thought. No, he would make her happy for the few minutes they would be together.

"Dear Kizzy," he said, even more tenderly than in the old days, "you spoke of some letter in which I confessed everything. I never wrote it. O dearest

love," he said, his feelings becoming uncontrollable, "why did you believe it without seeing me?"

"Don't reproach me, Rupert," she said, with tears in her eyes; "I suffer for it, every day, every hour."

"You were stolen from me, Keziah—you were not won;" and the thought that arose instantaneously, as if suggested by an evil spirit, was, "And why not take back my own?"

He did not refer to this thought, however, but asked her, "Is your husband kind to you, Kizzy?" And the words almost choked him.

"O Rupert, he drinks, and he has a dreadful clerk, who leads him into wickedness."

"Ah!" thought Elworthy, "what is so maddening an intoxicant as the sight of the beloved object within reach, and yet forbidden?" And he, who in his meditations, far away from Keziah, had felt himself so strong, found temptation upon him as powerfully as if he had never had scruples, never made resolves. Love, almighty love, was paramount. After all, in the eyes of God, was not Keziah his? His brain seemed to whirl, and in the whirl there

existed for him only himself and Keziah ; and he poured out his love for her afresh, telling her she was never out of his thoughts night or day ; telling her, too, how he had ridden in the night-time to have one look at her window, and thought never to speak of it ; but perhaps it would comfort her to know. And no one saw him ; so it could not harm his darling.

Every word he spoke was balm to Keziah's spirit. It had come to her again, the tender voice, and the kind look ; the irretrievably lost had come back to her. The floodgates were opened. " Oh, Rupert," she said, " now I know that you love me always the same, and that you are innocent of that charge, I shall bear my lot better. And, Rupert, promise me you won't marry."

" My own love, no," said Elworthy, stopping after each word impressively, and holding her little hand tightly between his own. " Oh, my Kizzy, perhaps we are not eternally separated, even now. Who knows what Providence may even yet send us ? Live in hope, my Kizzy. Happen what may, I am

always yours : yours far from you, or by your side, as you command."

"Oh!" suddenly said Keziah, "I've done very wrong to talk with you so. We must never meet again, never."

"What harm have we done?" said Elworthy, reproachfully.

"But it is wrong," said Keziah; "and if *he* were to know . . ."

She stood irresolute. But the look of her old lover caused her to almost wail out, "Why should it be wrong for me to see you? It does seem cruel."

"You are mine by God's law, but another's by man's law," he returned.

"But you must never meet me any more," said Keziah.

"Not unless you need me. But if you do need me, really; if you are in trouble, Kizzy; I will tell you where to find me. From this time, I come every Wednesday evening to your garden gate. I will never speak to you again unless you ask it. However, I will walk to the station with you now, at any rate."

The lamps were by this time lit. Keziah had not the courage to refuse his company ; and Elworthy, walking by her side, tried to imagine, for one moment's bliss, that she belonged to him. He found it happiness indeed to have her walking by his side, and no one near but strangers, quite as if she were his. He could not help asking the question, "What days do you come to Birmingham, Kizzy?"

"I don't know when I shall come here again," said Keziah plaintively.

"I will tell you what to do," Elworthy went on, refusing to notice his conscience, that was upbraiding him. "If you are going to Birmingham the next day, put a piece of paper under a stone outside your garden gate ; if the next day but one, put two pieces of paper ; if in three days, put three pieces of paper ; and so on. Don't write a word upon the paper, of any kind. If ever you want me, you will know that on Wednesday evenings I am near, and I shall look for the sign."

"I wish I felt it was quite right," said Keziah.

"Can there be a wrong or a right," burst forth

Elworthy, “in dealing with a man who has stolen the only thing I cared for in the world, and who is not kind to her! Besides, Kizzy, are you not sacred to me? Do you think I would harm you?”

The road leading directly into the station was but ill lit. Elworthy could not resist the temptation; he took his darling into his arms and kissed her. In another moment they were parted, and soon afterwards the train was bearing Keziah and the sleeping Bertram to Jumley.





CHAPTER XIII.

SUBTLETY'S SUCCESS.

AS Mr. Rimpler had predicted to himself, Mr. Hackbit was in condition that evening to hear something. The office closed at four, that is, to clients. The lawyer and his clerk most commonly spent their evenings there when neither of them had business elsewhere; and thither Mr. Hackbit had adjourned, when the maid came into the dining-room to lay the tea, and interrupted him at his brandy bottle.

He looked very quarrelsome, Rimpler thought; and decided to give him an object for his wrath. So he said—

“Are you going to the station to meet Mrs. Hackbit? She is later than usual.”

"No, I am not," replied the lawyer. "She shaid," continued Mr. Hackbit, whose articulation invariably suffered when he reached a certain stage of drunkenness, "she shaid she'd leave me. P'raps she'sh done it, be d——d to her."

"Not likely. Where could she go?" said Mr. Rimpler.

"To the convict," replied Hackbit, who alluded to Elworthy under this erroneous title.

"What convict?" inquired Rimpler.

"The infernal doctor convict. He wash going to marry her, but I wash one too many for him;" and Hackbit eyed his companion with a cunning leer.

"Perhaps he'll be too sharp for you one of these days. What's he like to look at?"

Mr. Hackbit began a description of Elworthy, more or less lucid; whereupon his clerk said—

"Well, now, that is strange. I've seen a fellow like that hanging about; and I saw Mrs. Hackbit with him the first day I came here."

The words penetrated Hackbit's fuddled brain, and almost sobered him.

"You've . . . seen . . . him . . . hanging about . . . here ; and seen Keziah . . . with . . . him !" he repeated. "You're telling me a d——d lie."

"Perhaps I'm mistaken," said Mr. Rimpler, in a tone of indifference, having shot his dart home, and knowing that he had aroused a suspicion which nothing he might say afterwards could lay to sleep. He had no wish to be thought to have any interest in the case himself ; so he immediately set to work to copy something, with an energy and precision which did him much credit.

"Rimpler," said Hackbit, interrupting him, "that was a lie you told now ?"

"Perhaps it was."

"Confound you, Rimpler, was it a lie you told just now ?" persisted Hackbit.

"Why, really," said Rimpler, "you nearly made me make a mistake, you shouted so."

"You'll make a bigger mistake if you keep anything from me. You said you saw them together. What were they doing ?"

"Well, really now, I can't say."

"That's a lie, at any rate. If you saw them

together at all, you can tell something about it. Come, now, what sort of terms were they on?"

"Well, now you press me, I will tell you, though I've no wish to make mischief. They seemed on very good terms, and sorry to have to part. I observed that Mrs. Hackbit was crying, or very near it."

"Well?" said Hackbit, interrogatively. "And you say he has been hanging about here since then?"

"Well, yes," replied Rimpler, as if he didn't take the least interest in the thing. "But I've not seen him with her."

"Well, what *did* you see him doing?"

"He did no more and no less than throw a kiss to his mistress's candle," returned Rimpler, with an aggravating jocoseness of manner.

"Look here, Rimpler," said Hackbit, "this is nothing to laugh at."

"There's nothing in the world fit to laugh at," replied Rimpler, "it's all so confoundedly stale. Bah!" he said contemptuously, "everybody's grinding on the same old game."

“Well,” said Hackbit, ignoring this comment, “if he’s been here in the night, Keziah’s never known it; I’m sure of that.”

“Oh, no,” asserted Rimpler, indifferently. “You are such a pattern husband, and make her so happy, I shouldn’t think she’d wish to know it.”

“Rimpler,” said Hackbit, not noticing the sneer, “tell me the downright truth if you can; do you think there’s anything in this you’ve been telling me?”

“It’s impossible for me to know,” replied Rimpler, innocently. “How can I, now? It’s a matter for you to judge in.”

“Oh,” groaned Hackbit, “if this is true, I shall die on the gallows.”

Hackbit was staring at a round bright spot on the ceiling, made by the lamp. “If it is true,” he went on, “and she plays me false, I’ll be the death of her, if I hang for it.”

Rimpler looked at him to see if he were in earnest. He decided that he was. Hackbit’s nature was one that prized beyond everything what it possessed not, or what it feared to lose. When Keziah

was his, safe, and he had no doubt, he ignored her for the most part. Now that he feared her old lover might still have some influence over her, he felt boiling over with a frantic animal love for her, which was very like hatred in its effects. He was pretty sober now, and a splitting headache was upon him. He sat still a long time, steadily thinking out the case; and then he decided to go up to Mr. Rimmon's, to see if his wife was there.

He found Keziah had not arrived; but his uncle was at home; and the first words his uncle addressed to him, on seeing him enter the room, added fuel to the fire.

"You look as if you had been drinking again, Thomas."

"D—— you," replied his nephew, seating himself in the easy chair by the fire, and kicking a cat, that happened to be lying there, half across the room.

Mr. Rimmon looked a little alarmed, but said nothing. Mr. Hackbit did not say anything, either; but glared in the direction of the sofa, under which puss had hidden herself. Mr. Hackbit picked up

one of Mr. Rimmon's slippers, and flung it at her; and then asked in a very peremptory manner, "How much longer is Keziah going to be?"

"Well, really," said his uncle, "how am I to know? She's under your care now, you know. She's gone to Birmingham, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Hackbit; "or hell, I don't know which."

"You are disgustingly profane, Thomas," said his uncle. "Keziah is likelier to go to heaven than either you or me."

"Ah," said Hackbit, "when you go to heaven the fallen angels will be restored, and you'll all go together. A fine meeting that will be: and may I be there to see. How handsome you'll look, with a crown on your head, and playing on the harp that you talk about. Oh, goodness!" and Hackbit roared with laughter.

As they spoke, Keziah, with Bertram in her arms, entered the house.

Keziah, though she almost feared to let herself be happy, was so much happier for having seen Rupert, that she had resolved to try once more to

conciliate her lawful lord ; and by this means she thought to balance the account in her conscience for the happiness she had stolen that day. Despite her load, she marched in with a gay and youthful step ; and finding her mother busy in the kitchen, sat down there a moment.

“ I’ve brought you the new window-blinds you asked for, mother,” said Keziah, watching her rolling out the paste. “ How late you are with cooking ! ” she went on.

“ Well, my dear, your father never told me till half-an-hour ago that Mr. Gray was coming to-morrow, so I had to begin now. I wish you and Thomas could come in,” she went on.

“ I’ll ask him,” said Keziah.

“ He’s in the dining-room with your father. So you’ll be able to tell us before you go.”

All at once they heard a noise that made them both start. It was the poor cat, which had been liberated from the dining-room, and had rushed frantically into the kitchen.

“ I think I’ll go in and speak to Thomas,” said Keziah.

So she rose, with the sleeping Bertram in her arms, and went into the dining-room.

Only her husband was there, Mr. Rimmon having gone upstairs to fetch something, which had been the occasion of the cat's getting out.

"Thomas," said Keziah, in a friendly and conciliatory tone, "mother wants us to come in here to-morrow, to have dinner with the minister."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Hackbit, smiling scornfully, "and I'm so very obliging, so very good-natured, and so very fond of your papa and mamma, that of course I shall accept with pleasure." And to this satire he added another. "Being on bad terms with me seems to suit you, Keziah : I haven't seen you looking so well for a long time, which is just a trifle remarkable, considering the tiring day you've had in Birmingham."

The tears welled up into Keziah's eyes. She could not help contrasting his tone to her with Rupert's. But with a mighty effort towards rectitude, she said, without any show of temper, "I am sorry I vexed you this morning, Thomas. Forgive me. I shall try to do better."

“Really, now,” said Thomas, “as I am of such a forgiving nature, and I’m so blind, and so deaf, and am so easily hoodwinked, and am so sure you’re so fond of me, I think I’ll forgive you. Really now, it’s quite pathetic to think of. This is the very spot on which I asked you to be mine. I obtained my prize: the purest, the best tempered, and wisest and most reliable of women; I congratulate myself. Yes,” he went on, “go and tell your mother we’ll be most happy to come in to-morrow, two turtle-doves, to coo at her table.”

Keziah knew he must be desperately angry, but had no idea of the cause; so she went and told her mother that, as far as she could make out, Thomas said he would come. She then said, “Good night,” and went out with her husband.

He took hold of her arm as they walked the few steps that led to their house, and held it with so tight a grip that she could scarcely help crying out.

“You are hurting me,” she said at last, unable to bear it any longer.

“It’s only my great affection,” returned Mr. Hackbit grimly.

Somehow, Keziah never felt so much afraid of him in her life. Her heart failed her as they entered the house together.

On the following morning the sun shone out, and Bertram and Leonard, in company with Wilson, went into the garden for fresh air and exercise. There they were joined by Mr. Rimpler, who, much to Wilson's disgust, began to laugh and play with Bertram, and at last ran with him to some distance.

"Who was the gentleman your mamma talked to in Birmingham yesterday?" asked Mr. Rimpler of Bertram, when at a safe distance from Wilson.

"I don't know," said Bertram, "but he was a beautiful gentleman, and gave me lots of nice things."

"And didn't he give dear mamma anything?" inquired Mr. Rimpler seductively.

"Yes," said Bertram, "he gave her some wine."

"He was very fond of mamma, wasn't he?" went on Rimpler.

"Oh, yes," said Bertram, "very fond of her."

"Can you remember what he said to mamma?"

"No," said the little fellow stoutly, "I don't know."

Mr. Rimpler had got all he wanted ; so he rode the boy round the garden on his shoulder, and then went into the office.

When he had gone, Wilson said to Bertram—

"Bertram mustn't love that naughty man, and mustn't play with him."

"But he isn't naughty," maintained Bertram, "and I like him. . . . I didn't know he went to Birmingham yesterday, but he did ; and he saw me and mamma and the gentleman."

"He's been teasing you," said Wilson ; "he never stirred out all day."

"But he did go, nurse," persisted the little fellow, "or else how did he see me and mamma and the gentleman?"

Though Wilson had discouraged Bertram, his words sank into her heart, and gave her what she would have termed "a turn." She had heard Keziah's story from Sarah. She knew, she could hardly have said from what quarter, that Dr. Elworthy was still unmarried, and in the neigh-

bourhood, that is, within easy distance ; and what Bertram had said made her think of Elworthy immediately, she could not have told why. It was not mistrust of Keziah. The one absorbing thought of her life was, Keziah and Keziah's happiness. Everyone else that she cared about had been taken from her years before ; and since she had nursed them all in illness, and seen them die one after another, in spite of all her care, and leave the familiar hearth desolate—father, mother, grandmother, two sisters, and a baby brother—she had gone out into the world to earn her living, at war with the God who had deprived her of everything, angry with people who had what she had not. She liked nobody, and nobody liked her, with the single exception of Keziah, and perhaps Mrs. Rimmon. She thought bitterly now, as she dwelt upon the circumstances, that her innocent darling might have seen her old lover—without intending it, of course, she thought, jerkily. But if that fiend in human form, Rimpler, was sneaking after Keziah, and prying, somebody else should sneak and pry too ; and she fully made up her mind that nothing Mr.

Rimpler did should pass unnoticed, and she meditated upon the matter till close on dinner time.

At this hour, Mr. Hackbit was filling the drawing-room with tobacco-smoke, while he lay upon the fashionable sofa. This had two ends, on one of which he placed his feet, while his head rested on the sofa pillow at the other end, at a considerably lower level. He feigned not to notice Keziah's entrance, dressed to go out ; he rather enjoyed ignoring her.

"Tom," said Keziah, in as friendly a tone as she could adopt, considering his attitude, mental rather than physical, "isn't it time for us to go to mother's ? You promised to go, you know."

"I promised, did I ?" said Hackbit, sententiously. "Then all I can say is, I shall not fulfil. You must have been a fool to think I should go. You go, if you want to. I don't want your company, and shall not cry while you're away."

"Oh, Thomas," said Keziah, who felt her patience much tried. "What's the use of sneering at everything ? Why can't we try and be agreeable ?"

“Come let us dissemble,” replied her lord.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” said Keziah.

“I rather think you do understand, both what I say and how to do it; but go on to your mother’s and your respectable father’s, and digest what I said, with your dinner,”

Keziah went away, feeling very desperate. It was of no use for her to try; her husband was resolved not to get on with her. Whatever good resolves she had made, her husband’s unkind conduct had made them take flight. He did not deserve to be considered so much. If he ill-used her she would stop trying to please him. When she arrived at her father’s, Mr. Rimmon and Mr. Gray had already returned from the chapel. Dinner was always early on the Sunday, because there was Sunday School afterwards. Mr. Gray looked very weary, and sank almost exhausted into a chair. Keziah’s kind heart was moved by the sight, and she sympathetically asked him if she could do anything for him.

“No, thank you,” he replied, with a smile, “I shall be better directly. The morning service always

tries me. The chapel is warmer in the evening. I don't complain," he went on; "none of these things happen by chance. If my heart is weak, and causes me to suffer, I am sure it is for the ripening of my soul, and for the perfecting of me for the life that is to come."

"Oh," said Keziah, "do you believe there is a life to come?"

"What a question, my child, to ask of a minister of the Gospel!" he said in some amazement.

She had not thought of the inappropriateness of her question, but had asked it out of the desolation of her soul, perhaps out of some latent hope that this man, who suffered, and was brave, might give her some convincing proof that there was indeed a future worth striving after, and a God that cared. She had never had very strong religious convictions, which was probably her father's fault. Yet she had a nature that could have been profoundly religious under some circumstances. Keziah's religion, if one may be allowed to term it so, was the desire to do right at any cost according to the light that she had; and so exemplary had been her life, that her question

surprised Mr. Gray not a little. He almost feared she was jesting at first, until he looked into her face; and a jest about religion he could scarcely forgive.

“You believe there is a God, Mrs. Hackbit?” he said nervously.

“Yes,” replied Keziah; “but I don’t think He cares for people.”

The minister echoed her words, “Care for people,” in a shocked tone.

“If He does,” went on Keziah, “He lets dreadful things happen.”

“Do you mean my heart disease?” asked the minister, greatly troubled. “If I see His love through it, surely no one else need doubt.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that,” said Keziah. “Heart disease is nothing.”

The minister was startled by her words, and hurt, too. “Heart disease nothing!” he thought. “Could she pass my wakeful nights, and suffer the torture I often suffer, and the terrible exhaustion that follows, she would not call heart disease nothing.” He looked at Keziah, thinking she knew very little, when she called heart disease nothing. Keziah was

thinking, "If he could change his heart disease for my pain of mind, day and night alike, with no rest, no respite, he would think any bodily illness light compared with it." In this manner do we look on the sufferings of others and compare them with our own.

Both remained silent, and the dinner went off quietly enough. No one asked where Mr. Hackbit was, though he had been expected. Eccentric and rude actions on his part counted as nothing; they were so ordinary.

While Mr. Rimmon was on his way to the Sunday School that afternoon, he happened by mere chance to see Mr. Rimpler shaking hands with his sister Dorcas. This brought to a head thoughts that had already been fermenting in his mind, and he resolved that he would call and consult Hackbit after school as to the advisability of taking Rimpler into their confidence.

This idea he carried out. He found his nephew in almost the same place where Keziah had left him in the morning, and in a stage near upon recovery from a drunken fit. When Hackbit saw his uncle

entering the room, he called out rudely, "Rub your shoes, will you."

"I invariably rub my shoes, Thomas," Mr. Rimmon replied, colouring a little; "and I have not departed from my rule on this occasion."

"What overpowering language!" said Hackbit, derisively. "Are you practising for the pulpit? I declare I'd come and hear you preach, to see how neatly the skin fitted."

"What skin?" inquired Mr. Rimmon, very much annoyed.

"A sheep's skin: I should notice particularly if there were any rents through which the wolf might be seen."

"Perhaps you are not aware, Thomas, that you are talking in a tone that may be heard all over the house," said Mr. Rimmon, shutting the door firmly. "I must tell you, Thomas, you annoy me very much; you promised you'd reform when you had got Keziah and a home of your own; and you've done nothing of the sort. You've got worse than ever, I think."

"Yes," returned Mr. Hackbit, "I think you're

correct. And it is strange, considering I have everything to induce me to be sober, including the most faithful and tender wife."

The tone in which this was spoken was not lost upon Mr. Rimmon, who said, more warmly than was his habit in addressing Hackbit—

"I don't know why you use that tone in speaking of Keziah. You know you can say nothing against her."

"Is that your belief?" asked his son-in-law. "Well, I was fool enough to believe in her once, so I can't wonder that such a pighead as you should."

"What have you against her?" demanded her father, with much asperity.

"I shan't tell you. It's none of your business. What was it you came here for?"

"I came to talk with you about the advisability of letting Rimpler into our secret. You see you're so often now unable to go to the office, and I lose business."

"Don't you fret your addled pate about that," said Hackbit; "he knows all about it now."

"Thomas!" said Mr. Rimmon, in a tone of the

utmost reproach. "How could you tell him without asking me!"

"I tell him! I didn't tell him. Don't alarm yourself."

"Then how does he know?" inquired the father-in-law incredulously.

"How does he know all my business, and everything, curse him! I don't know. But he just knows as much as you or I know; and I can't part with him now."

"I saw him speaking to your aunt just now," said Mr. Rimmon. "I didn't know he knew her."

"He knows everybody and everything," was Hackbit's conclusive rejoinder. "And now if you've said all you came to say, I wish you'd go back again; I want to go to sleep." At this hint Mr. Rimmon took his leave.





CHAPTER XIV.

MADELINE'S CHRISTMAS DAY.



MISS LAURA SALTRING had made herself extremely disagreeable to the waif and stray who had found refuge in her father's house. On the very evening of her arrival home, she complained bitterly to her mother that her bedroom would not be her own, as she phrased it, now that Madeline was to share it with her; and she scarcely noticed the blonde girl in the neat black dress, standing nervously in the background. No, we are wrong; she did notice Madeline very much, and mentally compared her with herself, unwillingly to her own disadvantage. Laura's own hair, of which she was very proud, when compared with

Madeline's looked dull and faded, for Madeline's resembled nothing so closely as the finest, brightest, gold-coloured silk that the silkworms weave. It truly shone like a glory round a face whose skin was dazzling. Yes, it could not be denied, Madeline was much prettier than herself. It was not to be endured. It seemed absolutely necessary to say something to Madeline, seeing that she must share the room with her; so Laura remarked to her, at the supper-table, "that she had made rather a long visit at Manchester, but that she didn't approve of people making long visits, as people generally got tired of them when they did so." This speech brought a vivid colour into Madeline's transparent skin; and Laura saw with delight that she had wounded her. But Madeline replied—

"I quite agree with you, Miss Saltring; and I think I have already trespassed long enough on your father's kindness. He has been kinder still in not telling me so."

Mr. Saltring, who overheard this, looked exceedingly hurt, and said to Laura—

"Are you forgetting, Laura, that this is my

house, and not yours, and that Miss Orme is my guest?"

"And is she to supersede your daughter?" replied Laura, very impudently.

This exasperating reply so saddened and humiliated Mr. Saltring that he said—

"My children cannot be superseded, Laura; but after this proof of the manner in which you intend to treat Miss Orme, I shall not subject her to the discomfort of sharing a room with you. So you can go and ask your mother to have a bed put up for you in the nurse's bedroom."

"And do you think I'm going to sleep with her?" exclaimed Laura, "and those children sleeping in the next room, with the door open, too, all night?"

"There's no alternative," said Mr. Saltring, firmly. "Miss Orme," he added, turning to Madeline, whose eyelids were quivering with tears ready to drop, "for my sake, and for my dear wife's, will you forgive the cruel and vulgar conduct of one who has known no trouble, but has been the cause of much?"

Madeline raised her violet eyes, but could not speak.

“I hope Miss Orme won’t consider that I have apologised,” said Laura, hotly, “for I see nothing to apologise for. And do you think it quite decent, Miss Orme,” she added, “to come here in my absence, and artfully gain over my father and my mother, and occupy both my room and my place in the family?”

“No,” broke in Mr. Saltring, sarcastically, “not your place in the family. You deserve that I shall speak, and I will. You never to my knowledge did anything to lighten your mother’s burden of household affairs. You have sat hours idle while your mother has toiled. Madeline has, since she came, lightened your mother’s burden so much as to make herself indispensable to us. So if one of you must go, it shall not be Madeline, but Laura Saltring.”

“No, Mr. Saltring,” begged Madeline, “let me go. I could not bear to stay after what Miss Saltring has said.”

“Madeline,” replied Mr. Saltring, “do not punish

us, my wife and me, for having an ill-mannered and ill-natured child."

Laura, however, proved intractable. She grew more and more openly disagreeable and insulting to Miss Orme, and at last, finding her father was not to be moved from his determination to afford shelter to this unhappy wanderer, she one day suddenly broke out as follows to her father:—

"You need not trouble yourself about me any more. I am not going to remain here. I am answering an advertisement for a situation. I shall not stay in this house to have a stranger usurp my place."

"Very well, Laura," said Mr. Saltring, "you shall try it."

"I don't want your permission," rejoined Laura. "I should go if you withheld it, just the same. You have never treated me properly."

"We have not flattered your pride, if you mean that," said Mr. Saltring. "And you, have you treated us well, Laura?"

To this she made no reply.

Two days later Laura Saltring left the house,

with a cold good-bye to all except Madeline and her brother Ted. She had obtained her situation.

The mother could not help fretting, though Laura had given her so much trouble of late that it gave her a sense of relief to feel that she had gone out of the house for a time.

"She's safe to come back," said Mr. Saltring to his wife. "She's too idle to keep any situation. You know that."

"But she'll have nothing much to do in this situation," said her mother tearfully.

Mr. Saltring had not allowed his daughter to go, without knowing where and to what she was going. With his usual tender-heartedness, he had gone himself to the place on finding out from his daughter where it was, though he had never mentioned the fact, and had prepared the path for her to some extent by telling the people something of her history and character. He found he had known them before, though he had not recollected it on seeing the name. It was at Mrs. Beredith's at Leamington that Laura was installed.

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Madeline on every occasion kept as much in the background as possible, distinguished most by her unobtrusive helpfulness. But when the vicar gave his Christmas Eve party this year, she was prevailed upon to accompany the Saltrings, principally to avoid making herself conspicuous by resisting their importunities. Here, during the performance of a Beethoven sonata for piano and violin, by Miss Towers and the vicar (he had a great idea of elevating the popular taste), Madeline sat with such rapt attention that the eyes of everyone became fixed upon her. Mr. Rockingham caught her in her listening attitude, and when the sonata was over, asked her if she played.

"I have been accustomed to playing," she replied simply. "Some of my relatives are professional musicians."

She had scarcely uttered these words when she appeared to regret them. Mr. Rockingham saw this, and so led her at once to the piano, and placed before her a volume of Beethoven's sonatas. She sought out the Sonata Appassionata, and rendered the surpassing music with deep feeling. Everyone,

even the least educated, present, was impressed, and all agreed that she must not be allowed to stop. Still as simply and as self-forgetfully she commenced "*Les Adieux*." Never was more pathos thrown into the sonata, Mr. Rockingham thought. She made the instrument speak impassioned and plaintive farewells, heart-failings and misgivings, and deep and hallowed affection. But when the theme of the Return broke from her fingers, the joyousness of it excited the vicar, and Amy Towers, and Madame Pelbois, who had in spite of herself drawn near, beyond description. Madeline turned, and seeing their marked pleasure, repeated this final movement unasked. Their silent wish thus granted them, caused Mr. Rockingham to reflect that he had never seen such delicacy of feeling in anyone before. He began to be deeply interested in her. When she had finished, he said to her, in a reverential tone—

"You said you had some relatives who were professional musicians, Miss Orme. Why did you not tell me you were one yourself?"

"Because I am not one," said Madeline gravely,

and looking without fear into the eyes of the clergyman.

“Really, Mr. Saltring,” said the vicar, “how have you possessed yourself of all this talent? and why, in the name of charity, have you hidden the light under a bushel?”

“Well,” replied Mr. Saltring, rather red, but very good-humoured, “I don’t know much about music myself, but it *did* strike me she played very well. But my daughter, who is a bit of a judge, thought otherwise.”

Mr. Saltring was redder after having made this remark, for he was conscious of having said more than he had intended. But feeling compelled to say something else now, he added, with all appearance of candour, “I may as well tell you that she sings, or you will say I have hidden that light under a bushel too.”

There was a general buzz when this was heard. Everybody was of one opinion. She must sing at once. Her talking voice was so sweet, what must it be when she sang?

“I feel as if I am being shown,” said Madeline,

with the faint smile which traversed her face rarely.
“ But since you wish it, I will sing.”

There was no need to ask for silence when she sat down once more before the piano. As the vicar had shown so strong a preference for Beethoven, it was “ Adelaïda ” that she chose to sing. She sang it to the Italian words. One woman, a butcher’s wife, remarked to one of her friends, “ It’s the beautifullest thing I ever heard sung. But I can’t think the words are very good. They sound Roman Catholic like.”

Never had there been such a party at the vicarage. Mrs. Saltring was reconciled to having come ; for wasn’t this great attraction of the evening her property, so to speak—to say the least, her importation ?

Late that night, Mrs. Saltring entered Madeline’s chamber to kiss her favourite again and make much of her. She found her weeping bitterly ; and nothing she could do induced the girl to say why. It was a great trouble to her, but she was compelled by Madeline’s entreaties to leave her. And Madeline kept a vigil that night, and made a retrospect

of her past, with its harrowing details, against her will. This was her occupation still when the slow winter morning broke ; it was Christmas Day.

All eyes were turned on Madeline as she, with the Saltrings, passed up the church aisle on Christmas morning. Those who had been at the vicarage the night before gazed with renewed interest on the musician who had been revealed to them. Something unusual was on the seat Madeline ordinarily occupied. It was an exquisitely-bound copy of the Christmas anthems ; and Madeline's name was inside the cover, in the vicar's handwriting. Within the book was a bookmark with three ribbons hanging from it ; at the end of each was a piece of silver, on which were engraved, though dimly, for the thing was old, the features of a composer.

"Well," whispered Mrs. Saltring, "he might have given you something new, at any rate, if he wanted to make you a present."

"Oh, no," Madeline replied. "He has offered me something he values, I am sure of it."

The bell stopped, and the vicar entered and took his accustomed place, not without a glance through

his spectacles at the Saltrings' pew. Madeline was holding his present in her hands. Perhaps no one but Madeline knew that he saw this. But it was evident to all the congregation that the vicar was on his mettle; he had never before preached such a sermon. And in the Christmas anthem the perfect voice of the stranger minstrel rose and filled the church.

"You never sang in church before," Mrs. Saltring observed to her as they were going out.

"It was the least I could do," Madeline replied.

At the porch the vicar met them. He shook hands with Madeline last. Instead of thanking him, as an ordinary girl would have done, for the gift she had received, Madeline fixed her clear eyes upon him, and softly asked, "Will you tell me to whom that bookmark belonged?"

"I did not expect that question," responded the vicar dreamily, "but I will tell you." And he fell behind the others, and the two walked leisurely between the gravestones, and the dark cloak the girl was wearing brushed his clerical sleeve.

"I am not surprised you asked me, now I think

of it," the vicar remarked, glancing at the graves and not seeing them. "I have one sister now, but I once had another. But she was lost. She used to play and sing like you. This bookmark was hers. When I heard you sing Adelaïda you won it from me. I will tell you some more when I can, if you will let me."

"It is very good of you to trust me," said Madeline, looking meekly down. "I will never part with the bookmark." And then, as if inspired to ask one more question, she inquired, "She did not die, your sister, did she?"

The voice in which he replied, "No," was scarcely audible. They had reached the church gates, and parted on their respective roads.

When she reached home, a new surprise awaited Madeline. A large packet had been left for her during church-time. The writing outside it was identical with that upon the book of anthems in the church. She sat down in a chair, and undid her packet. It was a volume of Beethoven's sonatas, but not a new one; and on the cover was the name "Olive Rockingham."

As the name met her eyes, they dilated. All the household were crowding about her; but she could not refrain from saying, "How strange! How very strange!"

"It is a great compliment," said Madeline, "that he should have given me these. They belonged to his dead sister, or at any rate, a lost sister."

"Well, what is there odd in it, then?" said Mrs. Saltring.

"Only this," said Madeline, dreamily turning the leaves of the sonatas, "my mother's name was Olive."

Mrs. Saltring expected more on hearing this: but Madeline began to draw off her gloves leisurely, then rose and went upstairs.

The plum-pudding had been brought in, all burning, according to old custom; and a dish of hot mince pies had called forth a shout of glee from the youngsters. This shout covered a cry from Madeline, who was seated opposite to the window, and saw someone pass. That someone rang at the door, and was admitted. A servant came in, and spoke to Mr. Saltring, and gave him a card.

“Strange!” he said; “I don’t know the name at all. Rimpler? Who can he be?”

At the sound of the name, Madeline grew more composed; “a chance likeness, that was all,” she thought.

“Well,” Mr. Saltring said to his wife, “I will go and see him, and bring him in. He may as well join us. He’ll take a glass of wine, at all events. He may possibly have come from a distance.” And Mr. Saltring laid his table-napkin upon the table in a heap.

Mrs. Saltring could not help noticing Madeline’s peculiar look; and it passed through her brain in a vague way how queer it was that people’s looks should be so different on different days, and resemble people they had nothing to do with. One day Madeline reminded her of Keziah’s baby, but now there was a proud look in her face that recalled to her no one so much as Mr. Rockingham. It was odd; and she unconsciously wondered what had brought it there at this particular moment.

Mr. Saltring’s loud voice was soon heard as he approached the door across the hall. The dining-

room door swung open. Mr. Rimpler was with him. Madeline did not turn her face. She had never known a Mr. Rimpler. He bore a very strange likeness to someone she had known. She would not look at him.

Mr. Rimpler for his part did not notice anybody but Mrs. Saltring, to whom he was introduced, and with whom he entered into conversation.

“You know the people I am with, I believe,” he said to her. “I am Mr. Hackbit’s clerk, and it is his business that has brought me here to-day, or rather his trouble. He is ill, and Mrs. Hackbit begged me to ask Mr. Saltring to come over. Claret? Yes, thank you.”

His glass was filled.

Mr. Rimpler glanced round the table, in the act of raising his glass to his lips.

“Good heavens,” he exclaimed—“I mean, good claret.”

Everybody stared at him. What did he mean by saying “good heavens,” for “good claret,” and in such a tone too? But it was quite clear he had sufficient cause to exclaim, for Miss Orme was in the

act of falling from her chair in a swoon. That must have been what startled him. But how odd, then, that he should have said "good claret," after "good heavens."

A great commotion followed, in which Mr. Rimpler made good his escape into another room, explaining, in a not altogether natural voice, that strangers were best out of the way.

He was alone in the drawing-room for some minutes. He struck his hands together two or three times, and said, "Curse it! She's infernally like her. She *is* her! and it's a most unpleasant business. She knew me; that's why she fainted. Con—found it!"

At length a smile broke over his face. "I needn't trouble myself," he thought. "She doesn't want to know me. Besides, I can swear I've never seen her before; mistaken identity. Very awkward though! I shouldn't care for it to come out that I was a medical student in Germany, and all the rest of it. Wonder where her mother is! By Jove though, she's grown handsomer; and more a fool, probably. She must have been a fool to believe me.

I wonder what she'd think, if she knew that the child wasn't dead, after all, but only taken away. It's a very strange coincidence that Mrs. Hackbit's adopted child should have so much of her look. Mere coincidence. It would be a little too much, like the penny agonies, if that were to turn out to be the very child. Yet such things have happened. It's so difficult to get at the truth, the woman having left the neighbourhood directly, and taken the child with her. And Mrs. Hackbit says this child was a collier's, who was killed in an explosion, and the mother died of the shock; so the thing seems square enough."

Mr. Saltring entered, and put an end to these reflections.

"How is Miss . . . the young lady?" asked Mr. Rimpler in a matter-of-fact way, and with no expression of any sort on his face.

"Miss Orme is better now. She is not strong. She has had some excitement this morning; that must be the reason of her fainting. It is not the first time she has done so since she has been with us."

"Has she been with you long?" asked Mr. Rimpler unconcernedly.

"Not very," replied Mr. Saltring; "but we have grown very fond of her, and we hope she won't leave us any more."

Mr. Rimpler devoutly hoped she would, but could scarcely make the remark.

"How long has Mr. Hackbit been so ill?"

"Well, he's been drinking a great deal lately; and I think it's been coming on him the last few days. There was no keeping him from it. I did my best; but who am I, to dictate to him?"

"There's no train for such a long time," said Mr. Saltring, "that we must drive. It's too far for one horse; but I know a public-house where I can change on the way. I've done it before."

Mr. Saltring's dog-trap appeared at the door; and he and Mr. Rimpler got into it, and drove away, Mr. Rimpler remarking upon the frostiness of the air and the slipperiness of the road, in the most natural manner, and not committing the human weakness of looking back.



CHAPTER XV.

MR. HACKBIT'S CHRISTMAS DAY.

IT was between five and six o'clock when Mr. Saltring and Mr. Rimpler arrived at Hackbit's house; it was dark. There was no light in any of the downstairs rooms facing the street; but one of the two upper rooms had a light, which shone through dark red curtains.

On entering they were met by Wilson, who ignored Mr. Rimpler altogether, and looked at, addressed, and answered Mr. Saltring only.

The doctor had seen Mr. Hackbit, and had ordered such large doses of laudanum, and so often, that Mrs. Hackbit dared not give them. She was upstairs with Mr. Hackbit, which Wilson did not

think proper or safe, as Mr. Hackbit was mad, in her opinion, and wanted a strait jacket.

Mr. Saltring went upstairs, and Mr. Rimpler remained where he was, for the time, and afterwards went to his own bedroom and sat there.

As Mr. Saltring opened the door of the bedroom, he saw Keziah, terrified and weeping, and Mr. Hackbit in a very menacing attitude. He seemed to recognise Mr. Saltring as he entered, and addressed him at once.

"I'm glad you've come," he said, with heavy and ill-aimed movements, trying to wipe the perspiration from his brow and face, which was deeply red. "You will see me righted. They're in a plot against me. She's in it," pointing with a trembling hand towards Keziah. "The devil's in it too. And I saw *him* last night looking at the window. They're all in the plot."

"We'll see it all put right," Mr. Saltring replied, soothingly. Then turning to Keziah, he said, "Wilson says you've not given the medicine the doctor ordered."

"It's laudanum," whispered Keziah, with dilated

eyes, "and so much and so often. I'm afraid."

"You must not be afraid," said Mr. Saltring.
"Let me give it."

Hackbit began to walk about the room unevenly and rapidly. Mr. Saltring steadily dropped the laudanum into a glass. "Come, Hackbit," he said, "drink this."

Hackbit made a step forward, and attempted to grasp the glass, but missed his aim, and his hand closed on air. He was standing close to Mr. Saltring now. His eyes were injected terribly, and looked as if he could not have slept for many nights. Mr. Saltring raised the glass to his lips. Hackbit attempted to hold it, too, but trembled so violently that his teeth chattered against the glass. He swallowed the dose, however.

"I shall be ruined," said he, as soon as he had swallowed it. "They're all in the plot, Saltring. There's that Rimpler, he ferrets everything out. He got to know all about uncle Rimmon and the business in Brum." Here he broke off, and began to strike the air violently. "Take that," he said,

“and that.” The perspiration was pouring off him now. Mr. Saltring pinioned him, fearing what he would do next.

“Look here,” he said, “Saltring. I’m not going to be cut with them knives. I know what you’re holding me for.”

“You’re not going to be cut with any knives,” replied Mr. Saltring.

“Well,” returned Mr. Hackbit, confidentially, “I’ve killed that fellow three times to-day, and there he is again.” And he shook himself free of Mr. Saltring, and plunged towards the mirror, in which was his own reflection, and sent it smashing into the window. Mr. Saltring seized him, but he was not sufficient. Hackbit struggled and raved. Keziah flew from the room, and called Mr. Rimpler. Wilson was on the staircase.

“Fetch the doctor,” Keziah said to her; “the master’s worse.”

She did not go back into the room. Once free, she dared not return. She just went downstairs and sat in the dark dining-room, in a kind of apathy.

She was startled from her reverie by the doctor’s

voice. He was asking where she was. She went to him.

"Have you given the laudanum, Mrs. Hackbit, twenty drops every two hours, since I was here?" he asked her.

"O doctor, I didn't dare," said poor Keziah.

The doctor was an abrupt, and not a ladies' man: so he became angry.

"Do you want him to die," he asked, with an aspect of ferocity, "that you don't obey my orders? He would have been asleep now, if you had done what I told you." And with this the doctor walked upstairs, Keziah following.

Mr. Hackbit had in the meantime been fastened to his bed, and had become more violent, though his efforts were ineffectual.

"Just one drink of brandy, Rimpler, come," Hackbit was bawling in his ear. "It would make a man of me again. Look here," he called out to the doctor, "these madmen make me stay out in this graveyard without a drink of brandy to steady my nerves. They can't see those ghosts, but I can. Oh, how their bones rattle! Just one little drink of

brandy, and I'll stand it." And he babbled on feverishly. "Look here, my good people, it's not my fault," he called out, "I am only the representative. You didn't borrow the money of me. Look in my pockets. I'm as poor as you. Don't bother me about where you're going to sleep to-night. See, I am in a cold graveyard. I've nothing better."

Mr. Saltring looked at the doctor, who was dropping some more laudanum into the glass.

"He's in a bad way," he said.

"He must get sleep," said the doctor, "at all costs. That fool of a woman didn't give the doses."

Mr. Saltring felt inclined to resent this language. But looking in the doctor's face, he concluded that his bark was worse than his bite.

Hackbit willingly drank out of the glass, but did not appear satisfied. His hands were loosed, and he moved them incessantly in a nervous way against one another, or upon the quilt.

"Are you staying here to-night?" the doctor asked of Mr. Saltring.

"Yes," he replied.

"Then give him the twenty drops again, every

two hours until he sleeps. Mrs. Hackbit ought to go to bed. She looks miserably ill. Give her two glasses of port wine."

"Thank you, doctor," said Hackbit. "That's something like. I shall be another man now." Overhearing the words, he supposed the wine was ordered for himself.

Keziah had slipped from the room, but she was standing outside.

"I have ordered you to drink two glasses of port," said the brusque doctor.

"No, no," said Keziah, waving him away with her hand. "Not that, not that terrible stuff, after—after what we've seen. Order me laudanum, like him upstairs; a good dose, and end it all." And she burst into a passion of weeping.

The doctor patted her head, as he might have done a child's, with his rough, heavy hand, which could be gentle, it appeared. "You want rest." And he took her with him downstairs, and administered the port wine there and then, and went away, muttering that women were most extraordinary creatures. "Only think of that beast

upstairs being cried about, and wanted to live. It seems the worse a man is, the more they stick to him."

As soon as he was gone, Keziah saw that a good table was spread for Mr. Saltring, and gave orders to Wilson in reference to the night and things for Mr. Saltring's use and comfort.

Some hours later, when all was hushed in the sick room and Keziah was lying on the couch in the dining-room alone, she saw a figure standing outside, looking up to her window. She sprang up like a child who sees its mother after a long absence. She could not let him go away again without having one word of comfort from him. She did not hesitate a moment. She might have wavered if she had. She flew to Elworthy's side.

"Oh, Rupert," she said in a convulsive whisper. "He's maddened with the drink."

Elworthy held her near him, and muttered something she did not catch.

"You have got some doctor, Kizzy?" he said. "Did he tell you to give laudanum? He must have it to get sleep, or he will die."

“Oh, yes, Rupert,” said Keziah, in a low voice, with some fear in it.

“My poor darling,” said Elworthy. What else could he say? “You must not remain here another moment; you are trembling.” And he added with some vehemence, “If you were ill, who should keep me away? Who is with him now? You’ve got a nurse, Kizzy?” And he thought with horror of the possibility of his darling having to listen to the ravings of that brute who called her wife.

“Mr. Saltring came, and is with him to-night,” she answered.

“God bless and reward him for it,” said Elworthy solemnly. “And now, good night.” And he said lingeringly, “I shall come again to-morrow, and until this trouble is over. You may speak to me or not, as you need.” He longed to kiss her, but did not do so. And Keziah found herself lamenting the fact, when she was once more in the darkened dining-room.

But all this time Mr. Silas Rimpler had been keeping a vigil, like the owl in a belfry, widest

awake when others are sleeping ; and had been in no small degree amused and gratified by the scene that was enacted under his window.





CHAPTER XVI.

CHRTISMAS BOXES.



THE following morning, to the utter astonishment of everybody but Mr. Saltring, Mr. Hackbit presented a perfectly natural appearance—in fact, seemed quite well. He was not in a good temper, however. Mr. Saltring could not help noticing that Keziah was not being well treated, and he felt that he could not leave the house without speaking of it. He had always been extremely fond of Keziah, and he and Hackbit had had former conversations upon the question of drink, which made it easy for him to speak.

The conversation took place while Hackbit was

sitting up in bed, eating his breakfast, at eleven o'clock, for he had slept till then.

"This is a bad job, Hackbit," Mr. Saltring began. "You were going to reform when you married. This is the way you've done it. Don't you think it too bad?"

"That's all you know about it," retorted Hackbit, with a cunning expression. "You see I thought I was marrying an honest woman, but I have changed my opinion, and see no necessity for being too particular."

"What do you mean, Hackbit?" said Mr. Saltring very indignantly. "Are you aware what you are saying? Do you know that you are attacking one of the best and purest of women by your vile insinuation?"

"Ha!" replied Hackbit. "That kind of language is all very well when you want to write poetry, and when you're in love. I now give it as my opinion that there is no such thing as an honest woman."

Mr. Saltring stared. He could not for the moment reply. At length he said, "You are

estimating others by yourself, Hackbit." And then, regretfully, "I used to think there was some good in you, but I don't think it now. A man who can slander that angel wants kicking."

"Look here," said Hackbit, stopping in the conveyance of a spoonful of egg to his mouth, "just you stay here to-night, and watch by this window, and if you don't see that Edmonton—that Elworthy, I mean, d—— him—my name is'nt Hackbit."

"One of your wild illusions," said Mr. Saltring, defiantly. "And if you think I shall play the spy on your wife, you have made a great mistake. I can trust her."

"Well," said Hackbit, "that, time will show. But if you don't believe my words, ask Rimpler."

"Do you mean to tell me that you've been setting that cur on to spy upon your wife?"

"No, I don't. It was he who told me first. He had seen them together, and seen him lurking about at night, when she hasn't dared to go out to him, I suppose."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Mr. Saltring,

mopping his bald head, "and the sooner you get that slanderous villain out of the house, the better. He must have had a good opinion of you, to tell you such a thing. I'll answer for it, nobody would speak to me of my wife so. You are as bad as he is, Hackbit. We can't so easily get rid of you, but you can get rid of him."

"No, I can't," replied Hackbit, shortly.

"Because you want to keep him as a spy, I suppose."

"No, not for that either. I can do my spying myself. But he knows too much of my business to be sent away."

"It must be creditable business, to make you afraid to send him away."

"It's none of your business at any rate; but I tell you one thing, Mr. Saltring, I shall not have you here lecturing me. Every Englishman's house is his castle. So take yourself off. I won't have you in my house another moment, on any pretence whatever. You see I can send you away, if I don't send Rimpler." And Hackbit tore violently at a bell rope near him. It came away in his hand, and

dropped upon the bed. Hackbit felt angry enough to have done anything.

Mr. Saltring smiled faintly, and said, "If you were going to ring to have me shown out, you might spare yourself the trouble; I know the way." And he moved towards the door. "This from a man," he thought, "whose life I have probably saved." How much he wished he had kept his temper. This man was master of the house, and of Keziah; and now that he was forbidden the house, he could help Keziah in no way, whatever might happen. He went slowly from the room, followed by a mocking laugh from the bed. When he heard this, and thought of the spirit that prompted it, his heart failed him for the girl who must remain under the same roof; and he thought bitterly, how far from human help a wife was, if her husband should ill-treat her.

He had been downstairs to breakfast, and Keziah had become almost cheerful, with him at the table to wait upon. She had been so comforted in having him in the house. How should he tell her he was never to come again?

He went to the nursery to look for her. She thought something was wrong, for he did not notice either of the children.

“Kizzy,” he said, “come downstairs. I want to speak to you. Heaven knows when I shall get the chance to do that again.”

She caught her breath quickly, and waited for him to explain.

“Yes, Kizzy, I am not to come here any more,” he said. “I have offended your husband.”

She listened, and waited. She could not have spoken if worlds had depended on it. The ground seemed to be taken away piece by piece from under her feet.

“O Mr. Saltring,” she said at length, with tearless eyes, “do me one great kindness. It is great, I know; and my heart will ache. But I feel now is the moment. I must make the sacrifice. Who knows what tragedy is coming to this house? Dear Mr. Saltring,” she said, clutching his hand in both hers, while he looked away from her, “take Bertram home with you. You offered to do it once, and I would not. I thought I was going to do so well for

him. I have not the power now. I feel he is not safe under this roof. My husband hates him. If everything must go, why not sooner as well as later? He will cry for me a little, but he will forget soon. You will all be so good to him."

Mr. Saltring had let her go on without replying. Then he turned his face full on her, and, holding her by both shoulders, said, "Get him ready." The smile that broke over the pale face would have been a reward for any man.

She was turning away, when he called her back to remark, "Shall I take both children?"

"No," she said, wistfully, "Lenny is safe enough; he is his father's child."

It was not long before the child was brought; and he seemed very much elated at the thought of going a "yide in a gee-gee." But to the astonishment, and even the disgust of Wilson, who was crying, and also of Mr. Saltring and Keziah, the child insisted on saying good-bye to "Rimpy," as he called him.

Some people think that children and dogs can always find out a bad man. We know from experi-

ence this is far from being the case. A man who is fond of children, and kind in his manner to them, will always win their regard, be he ever so bad in other respects.

It was a fact that Mr. Rimpler, hearing the child from the office, which was next to the dining-room, came in, looking a good deal cut up at the thought of parting with him, and seemed really moved as the child flung his arms about his neck.

“O you old hypocrite,” said Wilson, under her breath. She was like many others; to her Mr. Rimpler was a prodigy of evil; consequently she could not believe in his possessing a single trait of goodness.

But the hypocrite went into the office and positively shed a few tears when there was no one to see him. There had been a time in his life when soft arms had been thrown round his neck and he had felt himself the happiest man alive. But now, long years had passed since he had felt them. How these little arms reminded him of that time! At this moment, could he have chosen some definite path of right, he would have gone headlong into it.

But he thought of no direct course. And a vague wish to do better rarely ends in much good.

Keziah did not cry when she parted with her darling. She was filled by the thought that she was sending him to happiness and safety. She had made a great sacrifice, but she felt herself to be the gainer.

A box of clothes was to be sent on, and nothing went with the child but one little box containing immediate necessities.

Mr. Hackbit having got out of bed, saw the trap drive off, and understood the case at once; and though inwardly glad, he decided to be outwardly vexed. His bell-rope was off, he could not ring; so he slipped on some of his clothes as quickly as he could, and went downstairs in a way that would have startled anybody that saw him.

He found Keziah and Wilson drying their eyes in the dining-room. This suggested a revenge that must be effective.

“So, Keziah, you have thought fit to send Bertram away without consulting me. Now there is only one child, there is no need for Wilson:” this with an evil light in his eyes. “You can

occupy yourself with attending to Leonard. Then perhaps you will get to care a little bit for your own child. You've a month's notice from to-day, Wilson."

Wilson's red eyes flashed, and she flung out of the room.

"Why do you do it?" said Keziah. "Why do you send everybody away who is kind to me?"

"To please myself," said her husband coldly. "You have more to learn yet, Keziah. Do you think it safe to trifle with me?"

"I do not trifle with you," returned Keziah steadily.

"You lie," replied her husband. "Perhaps you would like me to send *you* away from the house, and give you an excuse to do what you want to do. Well, you shall not have your wish. You shall stay here, and wait on me, and obey orders. Don't think it's because I'm so fond of you. But I've a right over you, and here you stay."

"You treat me like a slave," said Keziah.

"You shall know more of what that means," said her lord, and left her.

Mr. Rimpler had heard this conversation, as any-

body might have done who had been in the office at the time. And when Hackbit, having left his wife, joined him, he was moved to say, having just had better feelings—

“You’ve been too hard on Mrs. Hackbit. In spite of all we’ve seen, I don’t believe any harm has been done ; and I don’t believe Mrs. Hackbit would ever do any harm. She has done no worse than speak to him. That’s my opinion, and I know the world.”

“Oh, you are clever, we know that,” retorted Hackbit. “You set the match to the fire, and now it has grown as big as a house, you expect a bucket of water to put it out. The game doesn’t pay. Do you want her yourself, that you begin to defend her ? Go and ask her to go away with you ; she would if you asked her.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” said Rimpler coolly ; “and I would never ask her.”

“Oh, you are both angels from heaven, I know,” sneered Hackbit. “But about the business, Rimpler. You’ll have to be more cautious. If you ruin people wholesale, we shall get into the papers. You sold up

an awful number of families last month ; and in one neighbourhood, too. They'll get talking together, and then it'll all get in the papers, and they'll find out who it is that's the real money-lender, and it will be ruination."

"It wouldn't be you ruined ; it would be Mr. Rimmon," said Rimpler.

"And isn't that me ?" retorted Hackbit, snappishly. "Don't I mean to have his money sometime ? He may make it a good deal more if he keeps dark a few years longer."

"If you go on drinking as you have been lately, you'll die first. You've drunk yourself into *delirium tremens* about as soon as any man I have ever seen."

Everybody in the house was surprised to see Mr. Hackbit go off to Birmingham that day, except the doctor, who said that opium had often done as much in cases of *delirium tremens*.

Mr. Hackbit had scarcely left the house, when Keziah put on her things and went up to her mother's. She was not away long ; but Mr. Rimpler noted the time when she left, and the time of her

return, in a mechanical sort of way. When he heard her come into the next room, after she had returned, he opened the door of communication, and addressed her in a way he meant to be kind, but received a chilling rebuff.

“Oh, very well, my fine lady,” said Mr. Rimpler. “The day may not be far distant when you will regret not having taken Silas Rimpler for a friend.”

“You haven’t it in you to be a friend to anybody,” retorted Keziah, and quitted the room.

It was on account of this rebuff that Mr. Rimpler, on Hackbit’s return, reported Keziah’s having been out, and added a little to it, on his own account. Consequently, when Hackbit went up to bed and found his wife with her head already on the pillow, he ordered her to get up, and told her to go and sleep in the spare room, by herself.

She obeyed in a bewildered dream, and crept from the room, carrying some of her clothes with her, and feeling that when Wilson was gone she would indeed be at the mercy of two villains. There was no bed prepared in the spare room. The bed that belonged to it was kept under another when

out of use. But what did it matter ? She laid herself wearily upon the mattress, and covered herself with the clothes she had brought, and lay awake all night.

The following morning, Keziah dressed herself and went down early. Hackbit appeared at the usual hour. Keziah glanced at him as he entered the breakfast-room. He knew it, though he did not look at her. He had his dressing-gown on, and he seated himself at his end of the breakfast table, and took up the newspaper which lay folded on his plate.

The servant brought in the coffee. Keziah commenced to pour it out. She passed her husband his cup. He put down his paper and helped himself to a chop, but did not offer any such attention to Keziah. She did not want anything, but a certain pride in her would not give in, and allow him to think she had no appetite. Besides, Mr. Rimpler would be in directly, and she did not mean him to see her with an empty plate before her. So she walked to her husband's end of the table, and helped herself under his very nose.

She came into such close quarters that Hackbit felt obliged to speak to her, though not by any prompting of courtesy.

“I hope you have spent a good night,” he said, satirically, “and that you feel refreshed, and all that sort of thing.”

“I thank you,” said Keziah, with mock politeness. “The question is rather unnecessary, seeing that it was passed away from you. Yes, I slept very well, thank you, much better than usual.”

Mr. Rimpler here made his appearance, rubbing his hands together, which were red with cold. He looked at Hackbit first, and then at Keziah; and after a curt good morning—they never shook hands—he remarked, as if taken unawares, “I think Mrs. Hackbit looks in need of a doctor.”

“Not at all,” remarked her husband, “she has just been saying how well she is.”

Keziah would perhaps have replied herself, but she was seized with a fit of coughing.

“Pretty well done,” observed her husband, “seeing you are not on the stage.”

Keziah began to eat her breakfast in a kind of

desperation, but the effort to swallow seemed great. Rimpler furtively watched her. Hackbit tried not to do so, but failed.

“Oh,” he said, getting up from the table at last, “I can’t sit at the table to see you swallowing your breakfast like a dog does dumplings.”

“Then go away, if you don’t want to see me,” said Keziah.

All this could not go on without some comments being made in the kitchen.

Both the cook and the gardener had agreed that Wilson had been ill-treated by Hackbit in having received notice, and had commiserated her. Thus it happened that the elderly female began to have a better opinion of the other domestics. This morning on entering the kitchen she closed the door, and said to the cook—

“Do you know where the missis slept last night?”

“No,” answered the cook.

“She slept in the spare room, with no bed and no covering.”

“What a shame!” cried the cook and Roberts, the gardener, simultaneously.

“I dread going,” said Wilson. “Who will there be to look after the missis when I’m gone! And she’s not a bit fit to look after Leonard.”

“He is a brute,” said Roberts, “as ever lived; and it’s much to me if Rimpler doesn’t get a match for him, before he’s done; and serve him right too.”

“Well,” said the cook, “if you do go, I shall look after the baby. I shan’t let her. It’s a sin and a shame; and he’s as rich as a Jew, I do believe.”

“I shall write to Mrs. Towers, and tell her all about it to-day,” said Wilson, following her own thoughts, rather than answering. “And I shall let Mr. David Rimmon know, too. It’s no use telling her father. He won’t hear anything against Mr. Hackbit.”

“And when you’ve told them,” said Roberts, “what can they do?”

“They might get a separation.”

“Them articles aren’t so easy got as you seem to

think," said Roberts. "You've never tried to get one, mayhap."

"Of course not," said Wilson, "how should I? But what's that got to do with it?"

"Well, a good deal," replied the gardener.





CHAPTER XVII.

COMFORT FROM OTHERS' WOES.



WHILE Wilson was writing to Mrs. Towers, and to David Rimmon, another letter was being written to David, that might bring him to Jumley. The writer was Joshua Rimmon.

This is what Joshua wrote :—

MY DEAR BROTHER,—This is the season when there ought to be goodwill towards men in all our hearts. Ever since my marriage, I have gathered my kinsfolk about me on New Year's Eve. Why break this sacred chain? [Mr. Rimmon liked this phrase, and felt himself waxing eloquent.] I would not rob you of my boy whom you have adopted, and who, I trust, may prove a blessing and a comfort to you in your declining years. Yet would I not have him a stranger to his father's house, an alien and an outcast. Therefore, I pray you, bring him and join my simple board for the New Year's Eve, and believe me,

Your forgiving brother,

JOSHUA RIMMON.

When David received this, he became greatly excited. He read it before Wilson's, which lay on the table. Jubal was reading a sporting paper he took in, and expressed but little interest in a letter from his father. David handed it to him when he had read it three times.

"Dear me," broke forth Jubal, having perused it with elevated eyebrows : "a masterpiece of rhetoric and hypocrisy !"

"I should hardly say that," said David mildly. "The command that we shall not judge, that we be not judged, means that we are not to put people down as meaning wrong when we don't understand their actions."

"I find no difficulty at all in understanding," returned Jubal, tenderly touching his wavy hair, and looking at it in a mirror opposite. "He thinks people in Jumley will talk if he doesn't have anybody for New Year's Eve ; and there's nobody to come but Dorcas and Keziah and us, and my most respected brother-in-law, who will probably refuse to dance attendance on that occasion."

"Of course I cannot control you," said David

mildly ; “but, for myself, I cannot pray, ‘Forgive me my sins as I forgive those who sin against me,’ and refuse at the same time to forgive my brother.”

“He has never asked you to forgive him,” said Jubal, a cynical smile breaking over his face.

“Well, no,” replied David, colouring a little. “Now I think of it, he hasn’t. Still, his ways aren’t like ours ; he never was like other people ; and I think he means it all right. But I think that it’s no part of my work to sift and sift, and find out if he means all he says. That’s the work of a higher than me. But it is for me to forgive seventy times seven, and to live peaceably with all men, so far as in me lies ; and I shall go to Jumley.”

“You’re not a bit of a man, uncle,” said Jubal superiorly, “or you wouldn’t be taken in as you are.”

“I’m afraid I am cowardly ; it has always been my fault,” said David simply. “But I don’t think I mean to be cowardly in this.” And he took up the other letter and looked at the address.

“I don’t know this writing,” he observed. “I wonder who it is.”

“Why don’t you open it and see?” said Jubal, rather rudely.

His uncle silently opened the letter.

“O Jubal,” he said, with a kind of cry. “Poor Keziah!”

“What’s the matter with her?” Jubal asked, rather indifferently.

“This is from her nurse-maid, Wilson; and she says that Thomas is frightfully ill-treating her. I am astonished.”

“I’m not. She shouldn’t have married him. She made her bed; let her lie on it.”

“I wonder how you can talk so,” said David, in a tone as nearly approaching anger as he had ever used to Jubal. “One would think you had no affection at all for her, your own sister.”

“She shouldn’t have played the fool. I was all right with her before.”

“Jubal,” said his uncle, deprecatingly, “is this the time to reproach her with a false step?”

“I’m not going to reproach her. I shall not go near her. But I’m not sure I won’t go home, if it’s only to see the mother. She was always decent enough.”

“I think it is your duty to go home, now your father calls you. And I think it’s your duty equally to be kind to your sister, who has certainly always been good to you, and who is sorely in need of a kind friend just now. You could be more to her than anybody else, if you liked. You ought to go, Jubal.”

“Oughts stand for nothing. If I go home, I don’t think I shall open my lips to my father. I shall certainly not go near Keziah.”

“Well, well,” said David Rimmon. “I do wish I had somebody to advise me.” And it passed through his mind how good an adviser Maud Towers would have been, had he been free to go to her. But he was not.

At the same hour Maud was equally perplexed with David, and the same subject was before her notice. She did not take long to consider her action. She wrote to Keziah:—

MY DEAR, DEAR KEZIAH, —I have heard to-day, with a pain that shows me how dear you are to me, of the sea of trouble which surrounds you and threatens to overwhelm you. One sad consolation I have to offer, and you will, I fear, say this is none. For in suffering for each other, we

do but increase each other's load. You are not alone. If you are overwhelmed, so am I. How came we both to make such mistakes? Our lots, though different, are strangely alike, except in one thing. You looked for a calm life with your cousin: I looked for bliss. You have missed the calm and found tumult. I have missed supreme happiness, and found supreme misery. Perhaps this does not sound like sympathy; yet as I write my heart bleeds for you. I find myself always sighing for the days when you and I quarrelled at my fireside, and were so very, very happy, and did not know it. None know what happiness is but those who have lost it for ever. We are both of us so young, Kizzy, it does seem hard that we should look with longing eyes to the time when death shall release us from our many sorrows. I can only think of that; and yet, it is not *happiness* in another life that I look for, only rest from this torment; for how can I expect the love that has died upon earth, and left my living love clinging to its corpse, to rekindle in another world? It will not happen. Eternal love that men talk about does not exist. What cause have I ever given to him that he should turn from me? He never spends a moment in my company he can help. We have no business connection now, even. For I have ordered all the rents to be paid into his hand long ago, and I take just what he doles out to me. I often walk in the cemetery you and I looked at together one day. You remember we said we would not go there again; it made us sad. Now, it comforts me just a little, for I look at the white stone and the fresh grassy mounds and I think, "This is a home where I may rest some day—sooner, perhaps, than I dare hope." I felt a bit hurt at first when I heard that Bertram had gone to Mr. Saltring's. I would have been so glad of him: but you know best. It will

surprise you to hear that I never paint anything now, and I never touch the piano. You may ask, "How do I employ my time, then?" I don't think I know. I can't think of anything just now that I am in the habit of doing. I hope you have not thought it unkind of me not to have written to you before; but I had no good news to send, and I did not wish to sadden you. I could not write to you and pretend all was right, when it was so far, far from being the case. But now nothing I can send you could make you more miserable than my silence. I feel very thankful to Wilson for having written; please tell her so from me.

Lionel is in a dreadful way about me. He can't help seeing how things are, though I have told him nothing. You know, I suppose, that Gerald is with Dr. Elworthy. They get on together very well; but Gerald never comes here. He must have seen and understood in his one visit.

Tom went in for his examination again, and got plucked. When he came and told me, he said I need not fear; he would fulfil the condition that I had made for him on marrying him. To think of my being interpreted in that way, Kizzy! You know it was for him, and him alone, I wanted him to get his qualification. What could it matter to me? What can anything matter to me now, since he does not love me, and never, never will again? If I had said anything like that to you in the old days when we were together, you would have shaken that small head of yours, and made me some saucy answer. I wonder if you ever make saucy answers now to anyone. I cannot bear to imagine you as always grave; it seems so unnatural. But perhaps it is as difficult for you to imagine me wandering about in an aimless way, existing from day to day, not living, not caring a bit what I put on, nor how I look.

But I do know that nothing I put on, nothing I could put on, could make me look pretty, as you used to think me. I have grown very thin, and my eyes always look heavy and dull ; it must be sleeping so little and crying so much, I suppose. But enough of this. You used to say I was unreasonable. If I could only have you again all to myself, I don't think I should be so unreasonable. Trouble makes such changes in one. Tom is changed ; his hair is turning quite grey. And now, dearest Kizzy, let us be all in all to each other, though it be only in thought and at a distance.

Your faithful friend,

MAUD.

When Keziah received this letter, she had a brief moment of rest from her own sorrows in thinking of her friend's. "Ah," she thought, "however bitter my lot is, Maud's is worse: I am only separated from the man I love, and am ill-treated by the man who is my husband ; but Maud has lost the love of the man she still loves and who once loved her. Yes, that is worse." She could picture it. She had only to think what it would be like to have married Rupert and then to have lost his love.





CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. RIMMON LOSES MORE THAN HIS TEMPER.



EZIAH did not answer Maud's letter at once, for she had other matters in hand. She had promised to go in and help her mother in preparing for the New Year's Eve festivities which were to come off as usual. Mr. Hackbit had been persuaded by his father-in-law to join the party, just to keep up appearances. Whether he would actually do so or not was still a question. He was not drinking so much; he had had a fright. How long this would last was doubtful. He made no objection to Keziah's going in to assist her

mother, telling her politely that her room was better than her company.

Keziah's spirit rose against this insult, and she determined to fight hard to look as if all were right, and not give him the pleasure of cowing her. She entered her father's house by the back way, and went into the kitchen. There was Mrs. Rimmon in a large apron, tying the puddings up, ready to put into a pot that was boiling on the fire.

"This grate's worse than ever this year," Mrs. Rimmon began, "and now the boiler's cracked, and we can get no hot water. Just as if there wasn't worry enough, without that. And I'm sure I don't think any of the fuss as is made is worth while. Who wants to come here?"

"Never mind, mother," returned Keziah. "It isn't worth making a bother about: you should get hardened. Give people their deserts. If the dinner gets spoiled, don't you trouble your head about it. It's no good people worrying themselves into the grave because they can't please people who are unpleasable." She had been taking off her things while she spoke, and turning up her sleeves, in

readiness to be of use. "What shall I do first, mother?" she asked.

"Well, Kizzy," said her mother, "if you'd just make a bit of paste for a mince pie for your father's dinner—he'll expect one."

"And is nobody else to have one?" broke in Keziah, sharply.

"Not to-day," said Mrs. Rimmon. "You see, we shall all get some on New Year's Eve."

"All right," rejoined Keziah. "If no one else is to have any, he shan't have any either."

"If you won't make it for him, I must," said Mrs. Rimmon, resignedly.

"Don't be so stupid, mother. Tell Grumps you asked me to do it, and I wouldn't."

"Oh, Kizzy," said Mrs. Rimmon, beginning to cry. "There is always a plenty of wasps flying about, without stirring up a wasps' nest."

"Indeed," retorted Keziah, amused. "And if the wasps' nests are left alone, the more wasps will be flying about."

"Well, those as stir them up are sure to get stung," said Mrs. Rimmon.

“Well, what does it matter,” said Keziah, “if they don’t ask other people to bear the smart for them?”

“I have heard of people being stung to death,” returned Mrs. Rimmon, who had got deep in the metaphor, and rather astonished herself.

“I am one of the people that would rather be stung to death at once, than be pestered by occasional stings for years, and years, and years.”

There was more in this than Mrs. Rimmon could see, for she in common with others of the human race, was thinking of her own situation more than of her daughter’s.

When half-past one came, Mr. Rimmon arrived, and demanded his dinner. A cloth was laid for him on the end of the dining-room table, and further than this he could see no preparation, so he came into the kitchen to view the land. He caught sight of his daughter. It had been to him some satisfaction that Keziah was caged; but he had never lost his fear of her. So when he saw her there, he did not break forth as he would otherwise have done.

“What do you want?” Keziah asked sharply.

“Well, my dinner,” replied her father.

“Well, the quieter you keep about it, the sooner you’ll get it.”

What was the use of his remaining in the kitchen? None at all. He went back to the dining-room, and took up a volume of Wesley’s sermons, and scanned it morosely. He had not to wait long. Keziah with her own hands brought a tray in, and to Mr. Rimmon’s infinite astonishment, she placed between his knife and fork, a plate with a few thin slices of cold meat upon it.

“What’s this, Kizzy?” he said, cying the plate from where he sat, with much disfavour.

“It’s your dinner,” said Keziah, “and the sooner you eat it the better.”

Mr. Rimmon seated himself at the table, but did not begin to eat the meat. He was thinking that he would make his dinner off the mince-pie that was to follow. He waited a long time, but nobody came. He rang the bell. Sarah answered it.

“Take this away,” he said, pointing at the plate, “and bring the mince-pie in.”

"There's no mince-pie," said Sarah, half-afraid.

"No mince-pie!" said Mr. Rimmon, with a stop after each syllable.

On hearing this, Mr. Rimmon got up from the table with the intention of going without any dinner. There was an iron safe in the wall of the room, and he unlocked it, intending to get some papers out. He put the door hurriedly to, as he heard someone coming in. He thought it was Keziah, and resolved not to speak to her. But it was his sister Dorcas.

Her brother looked at her, and wondered what on earth had brought her there. Her face was beaming.

"What do you think, Joshua?" she said.

"I don't know," answered Joshua, very indifferently.

"That wretch Brougham Banner's son has been drowned; one of the twins, you know."

Having imparted her news, she waited. As her brother did not speak, she said—

"Are you not going to say anything, Joshua?"

"Yes," he answered. "Go about your business."

"Oh, indeed," said Miss Dorcas, swaying her head up and down, "I must go about my business,

must I? And is it any part of your business to send me about my business, answer me that?"

"I tell you I don't want to be bothered with you," said Joshua irritably.

"Oh, and you're ready enough to use me," said his sister, "and also to abuse me, so it seems. But let me tell you one thing, there's a dog on your track. Ha!" she said, "I thought you'd show some interest at that piece of news. Only last night, sir, I heard a man call you a whited sepulchre."

This Scriptural phrase stabbed Joshua deeply.

"Was it a Jumley man?" he asked.

"That's my business, and I'll mind it."

"What do you want to be such a fool for?" said her brother. "If anybody said such a thing, I ought to know who it is. Would you let the ground be taken from under my feet, and never give me warning?"

"Measure for measure," said Miss Dorcas. "The measure you mete shall be measured to you again."

"Well," said her brother, with a grim smile, "my ruin would be your ruin, thank Heaven."

"Ho, ho," laughed Dorcas. "When a house

falls there's always somebody on the look-out to carry the treasure away. What if the one who carries the treasure away should marry *me*!"

All the anxiety died out of Mr. Rimmon's face on hearing this. "A mare's nest," he said. "I know whom you mean." And he laughed satirically, locked up his iron safe, and was leaving the room, when the key dropped from his pocket on to the cushioned chair, and he did not hear it. He went back to his bank laughing to himself.

No sooner had he gone right away from the house than Dorcas gleefully seized the key. "O Silas, my dearest," she cried, "my time has come at last." And she opened the safe, having previously locked the door, just as Joshua Rimmon had done in the hour when he betrayed Rupert Edmonton. Somehow the words she had just used to her brother came into her mind, she did not know why—"The measure ye mete shall be measured unto you again." Had she known all about the treacherous deed her brother had been guilty of, the words would have been ominous enough. But she did not.

Having taken a certain bundle of papers out of

the safe, she placed the key on the leather chair where it had fallen. So it happened that when Joshua came home and his eyes fell upon the key, a cold sweat broke out upon him; and a great feeling of gratitude came into his heart, he hardly knew to what or whom, to fate most probably, that he and no other had found the key. It never occurred to him in any form that it might have been found and used.

That night Dorcas Rimmon waited in the shadow of a ruined engine-house in the Old Park. A keen wind was blowing, and she stared as far as she could along the dark path that led between worked-out mines towards her brother's house. But, wearied by the intense darkness, she turned her eyes away to rest upon the dim lights of the town and the glare of the furnaces. A figure of a man was approaching between her and one of the lights. Could it be Silas, coming another way? He might have been somewhere for Thomas, and so have been unable to keep his appointment.

The man was passing her. "Perhaps he can't see me," thought Dorcas. She stepped out a little.

"Silas," she said, in a sharp whisper. The man turned upon her and scanned her.

"What are you prowling about for?" said a husky voice. . . . "That is the expression you use in this country? *Oh Ciel*, what a country it is."

Dorcas retreated into the shadow. But she was not so easily quit of the stranger, who followed her.

"And was it for me you were waiting?" he said, in a charming manner. "I took you for a pit-bank worker, as they call them in this heathenish land. But I see you are respectable. These pit-bank workers, they will give you a kiss, but they do smell of the coal. But you smell sweetly of the lavender-water. It is a shame you should wait here in solitude. I will bear you company."

"Are you a stranger to these parts?" asked Miss Dorcas, hoping this stranger would stay until Silas Rimpler came up, to excite his jealousy, and so increase his ardour.

"Yes, I am a stranger to these parts," replied the gentleman. "But I will know the neighbourhood better if you permit me."

"Oh," thought Dorcas, delighted, "he thinks the

neighbourhood belongs to me !” She wondered what this stranger was like, it being too dark to distinguish his features.

“Are you intending to stay here,” asked Dorcas sweetly, “for any time?”

“I stay,” replied the stranger, “wherever soft arms detain me. But at present it is at Wolverhampton I am, amusing the public, which is not very elevated, it does appear to me.”

“May I ask you where you are going now?”

“I was going up to a Mr. Hackbeet’s, on a little matter of business.”

“Oh, he is my nephew.”

“Your what? *Oh Ciel!* Then you were the youngest of the family, is it not, come to brighten the old age of your esteemed mamma and papa?”

“No, I am not the youngest,” replied Dorcas. The ardour of the gentleman seemed to go down considerably, and he bade her a cool good-night.

As he was departing, not taking particular notice of his footing, he threw himself into the arms of Silas Rimpler, who was advancing from the opposite direction.

“What the devil are you about?” jerked out Mr. Rimpler, catching his breath, and staggering.

“*Mille pardons*, my good friend,” said the foreigner. “It is dark as the grave, this country of yours. I am despair to find my way to Mr. Hackbeet’s.”

“The way isn’t through me,” responded Mr. Rimpler irately, and imagining for some reason that he recognised the voice. “What do you want with Mr. Hackbit? I belong to that firm.”

“Well, I am come to Wolverhampton,” replied the foreigner confidentially, “to do some conjuring performances. They are not elevated people at all; they will not give up a room but I must pay first; and the printer, he will not print my bills until I do first pay him. Is this not strange? And I am absolutely without the means to pay till I have performed. I am without watch, and many other things, which Monsieur the pawnbroker is in possession of, at the last place I am in; and a kind gentleman to whom I explained my difficulty has told me you are agent for a money-lending firm.”

Rimpler thought, “Hackbit wouldn’t be too

pleased to have his private address given," and wondered who could have done it.

"It would not matter so much," the foreigner went on, "but I have an incumbrance with me, in the shape of a woman who is no longer young and no longer pretty, who, like the cherubim in your Church prayers, 'continually doth cry ;'" and he waited, evidently expecting pity on this point ; but Mr. Rimpler only laughed. "I see you have never been in a like situation, or you would not laugh. It is no matter for laughter, I will assure you."

"That's all you know about it. Why don't you get rid of the woman ?"

"I have already done so, many times ; but she has a fine instinct, she. She comes again ; and so, if she were in her grave, she would come again, that woman."

"All right," said Rimpler ; "you go on up that way," vaguely indicating, "and I'll follow you."

"If you have no objection, I will wait for you. It is not inviting, that road. I have been everywhere, but never have I seen something like this."

“But I have an objection. You won’t hurt yourself. Foreigners are always so nesh.” He had picked up that word in the neighbourhood.

“If you do not object,” said the foreigner, “you will be so good as to lead me to a place of safety, a little farther on, where I will remain while you speak with Ma’em’selle.”

Rimpler was furious. “Confound you,” he said, “what do you mean?”

“Oh, I thought the Ma’em’selle was waiting for some one, by that piece of building.”

“It isn’t for me, at all events,” said Rimpler, telling a lie.

“Oh, then, if it is not for you, I will tell you I have spoken with her, but she is no chicken, she.”

Rimpler was thinking, “How could he have found that out in the dark?” and said so.

“There was nothing of shyness in her manner,” said the foreigner; “and I did gather from other indications——”

Rimpler decided that Dorcas should wait it out that night, and went on with the foreigner to Hack-bit’s, where a loan was arranged.



CHAPTER XIX.

A COSTLY RELIEF.

THE little matter of business Monsieur Pelbois had to transact with Mr. Hackbit was arranged actually in that gentleman's absence. Keziah had been up at her mother's all day, so Mr. Hackbit took the opportunity of looking over all her belongings, imagining that he might discover some preparations for flight. But in this he was disappointed. He found nothing in Keziah's orderly drawers and boxes but the most natural and ordinary things. Inconsistent as it must appear, he was angry at not finding what he had sought; and a resolve came into his mind, without his being perfectly conscious of it. If people put themselves

in a frame of mind to do a thing, they are pretty sure to find an opportunity, and themselves prepared to act.

Hackbit's opportunity came this night. Keziah had returned in time for supper, which had been put off owing to Mr. Rimpler's and Mr. Hackbit's non-appearance. Silas and Monsieur Pelbois came in first, and remained in the office some time, the foreigner going away before Hackbit's return. That gentleman made a great noise in the entrance hall when he did come, and to all appearance had been drinking again. He came in smiling just as he always smiled when he was going to do anything remarkably offensive.

"Well, Rimpler," he said, sarcastically, "I hope you are enjoying my wife's society."

Rimpler made no reply. Keziah bit her lip, and looked angry.

"You know the stock she comes of, Rimpler," he went on. "One of them, whose Scripture knowledge is great, said something about not gathering figs from thistles. I wish I had thought of that when I married my wife. We're all fools till we

learn. I took her for a saint. You know what she is, Rimpler. Did you ever see a man so infernally sold?"

Keziah fixed her black eyes with wrathful intensity on Hackbit's face. "What do you want to goad me to do?" said she.

"Is there anything you are anxious to be goaded into doing?" replied Hackbit, seating himself in a chair, and tipping it up on the hind legs.

Keziah looked as if about to quit the room; but she changed her mind, and sat down. She would not have done so had she known what would follow.

"Have you ever heard the story about my wife, Rimpler?" went on Hackbit, insolently. "She had a situation at Leamington, and managed to get over the medical man in attendance at the house, who was subsequently taken up on a charge of murder. She then laid her traps for me, and here I am. Anyone might pity me."

"How dare you insult me so!" broke out Keziah. She left the room, followed by insolent laughter. She did not appear again that night. A

bed had been prepared for her properly in the spare room, since the night she had lain there on the bare bedstead.

Hackbit went to bed rather early, for him. But Mr. Rimpler had no notion of going to bed. He had seen Keziah a few days ago place a sheet of white paper under some stones. He examined it: nothing was written on it.

He had sat in his room silently for a long time, when he heard a creaking upon the stairs. Somebody was going down; of course, it was Keziah. He waited some time patiently; but he did not see her appear outside. He thought to himself, if she had gone to meet that fellow Elworthy, they must have gone round to the back of the house; so he determined to go round and reconnoitre. The house was quite still. He thought he might venture to do it.

The landing window lay between the room where Keziah was now sleeping and the night nursery. He thought, if they were in the garden behind, he should hear as well as see from this position. It was his habit when he went into a new house to try all

the locks and all the windows, to learn if they had any peculiarity of opening and shutting. This he always managed to do in a natural manner. Consequently he had ascertained that the landing window would open without a sound, though his own would not. So he very quietly raised the window, and put his head out.

He could see nothing, it was so dark. But then, he argued, "If I can see nothing, the same darkness renders me invisible to others, which is also something." Yes, there was someone moving below, and the sound of low voices.

"I am afraid to stay in the same house with him," he heard Keziah say. "Yet, if I freed myself, and went away from him, then he and all the world would say it was to go to you, which I would never do, except as now."

A low voice answered, "Is my reputation worth more to me than you are, Kizzy? You must come to me, if you have so much reason to fear. And why not? These laws are men's laws, and not God's. You are mine by right. What does it matter what people say? You would go away, far from the

reach of their voices. It could not matter to you then."

"If no one knew, I should know," was Keziah's reply. "No, I will never do that. If I leave my husband's roof, you must promise me faithfully you will never see me or speak to me again."

She was so earnest that he could not but promise. But he felt in his heart he had promised more than he could perform. In the battles of the soul it is a question of the right of the strongest; and love for Keziah, and desire to possess her, were stronger this time with poor Elworthy than any man-made laws.

Silas, who had heard every word of this, felt he had been having a very good time; and as they ceased talking, and appeared to separate, he slowly began to put down the window.

But something happened that made him stop suddenly in the operation. Something appeared to fly at him, and was pouring down upon him. He was taken so much unawares that he could not help crying out, whereupon he was seized by the throat and hair, and shaken about as if he had been a pillow: after which he was flung upon the landing,

and received the contents of a bucket, which nearly choked him. He could do nothing but utter inarticulate sounds. Nor did the experience terminate as yet. Suddenly he felt himself being dragged, in the darkness, along the landing, and into his own room. Then a voice for the first time accosted him. It was Wilson's. "Take that for a lesson, you sneaking eaves-dropper," she said; "and tell anybody about it you wish to"—this in a tone that showed Silas plainly she was acute enough to know he would say nothing about it.

He dragged himself up from the floor after a moment or two, and struck a match. His door was shut. He heard a wiping of something going on outside, and concluded Wilson was wiping up the spilt water. He lit his candle, and remembered savagely that he had been unable to utter a word or do anything, and wished he had the time over again. But it is only on the stage that badly-acted scenes can be gone over again.

Mr. Rimpler slowly and with some of his ordinary manner advanced towards the glass, and looked at himself, which he continued to do for some

minutes. His face had assumed its normal brick-wall expression. At length he began :—

“ Item No. 1, cravat missing ; item No. 2, black mark on left eye : item No. 3, portions of hair missing ; item No. 4, shirt front torn out—as near as possible,” he added. “ Item No. 5, large lump on back of head, can’t see it, can feel it enough to make up for that ; item No. 6, a dreadful feeling along the vertebræ, from top to bottom, indescribable, can’t see that either ; item No. 7, a large piece of cuticle missing under black eye, will necessitate a piece of plaister. Item No. 8,” he said, as he began to take off his clothes, “ every one of my things as wet as if I’d been swimming in them ; item No. 9, can feel another lump coming out over my left eye ; item No. 10, an infernal headache. All this to be put on paper.”

Having divested himself of all his clothes, Mr. Rimpler wrapped himself in a blanket, and wrote down his list of items in his pocket-book, to be remembered against Wilson for ever ; and while he wrote, Wilson had cleared away all the mess ; and was anxiously waiting for Keziah to come in. And

now that her exertions were over, and that she had had the pleasure she had longed for, of giving it to "that Rimpler," a feeling of depression came over her. She had heard Keziah's voice below. "Then it is true," she thought, "after all. What a pity!" And she waited and watched for Keziah's coming in. But Keziah was at that moment being persuaded never to come in any more; and she was wavering.

Both she and Rupert had heard the cry, though they had not recognised the voice; and they thought they had been discovered. Keziah had clung desperately to Rupert's arm and he held her firmly.

"Come away, Kizzy, my dear love, while there is yet time. If you go in, he will murder you, now he has discovered. Why should you throw yourself into the jaws of death at random, and ruin my life too, for such a villain as he is? What could the world say against you? They know what he is. Kizzy," he pleaded, "you who are so brave, and have dared so much. Come, dare the world's opinion, and go with me. I have plenty of money. I could get a practice abroad, easily. Think, let love decide, to whom do you owe allegiance? To that

man, who has done nothing to earn it ; or to me, who am ready to do everything for your sake ? You trusted yourself to him ; can you not trust yourself to me ? Think, Kizzy, of all you have made me suffer. Can you imagine what my feelings must have been, to come out of prison, to find the one who should have been true to me, though all else had failed—to find you belonging to another ? Do you not owe me anything, Kizzy, for loving you so after all this ? But you must decide now, this very moment. Someone will be here. You must decide between him and me.” And not waiting for a reply, he led her with his strong arm about her, down the garden path and out at the gate.

She had been scarcely conscious of anything but the strength of what he said, till now that she was moving away. She stopped with a new strength, and loosed his arm from about her. “No,” she said, “I can but die. I will go back. He will think all this evil against me. He shall never have reason. Since I have lost you, my self-respect is the only thing left to me ; and would you, who say you love me, rob me of that ?”

He did not offer to take hold of her again. A streak of light was beginning to be visible in the east, and the objects in the garden began to be defined. "Oh!" she said, with a shudder, "it is growing daylight; another moment and it would be too late for me to go back." And even while she spoke she fled away, and entered the house. As she went she heard a great sob follow, and it wrung her heart. She hesitated one moment. "Is he worth this sacrifice," she said to herself, "of both of our lives?" But even while she thought, a voice within her bade her go back. She entered the house. A tall figure intercepted her path. It was Wilson. "Oh, Miss Kizzy," she said, calling her by the old familiar name in a heart-broken kind of way, "I wouldn't have believed it of you, I wouldn't."

Keziah, in her old impetuous manner, flung her arms about Wilson, and cried upon her shoulder. "Do not judge me so harshly," she said. "You would not if you knew all."

Wilson was unrelenting, though crying; she was angry with Keziah, and as yet had no comprehension of the case.

“I know appearances are against me, and I cannot make you believe in me. But I have done nothing so very wrong.”

“Oh, don’t make light of it, miss. It cannot be right, whichever way you put it.”

“I know I ought not to have met him. I never shall meet him again.”

“It’s too late to mend matters now,” said Wilson. “I’m not the only one as has seen you to-night and has heard all.”

“Do you mean my husband?” asked Keziah faintly.

“No,” said Wilson bitterly. “You might know who it is—that Rimpler. And he will tell everything, and it will be just as bad.”

“O Wilson, there’s no pity for me in your tone. Do I not deserve some pity?”

“You’ve been drove to it, I know. But that never counts for much. The only thing as counts is that you’ve done it. And, oh, that I should have lived to see this day!”

“Shall I go and tell my husband all about it before Mr. Rimpler can go to him?” said Keziah, in a tone that might be used in a forlorn hope.

Wilson hesitated. "No," at last she replied, "I think not, miss. His anger might be so that he wouldn't know what he did to you, if he heard it from you." And Keziah felt that a stronghold of her integrity had died; for she could not say to her husband, "He never tried to persuade me to leave you." Some women might have said it, even if untrue; but Keziah could not. She feared this must come out with the rest. She would not tell part of the truth, but the whole truth, if she must speak. And even if she did not speak, her husband would come to her, and she would have to answer him.

While they talked, the grey streak in the sky had grown larger. Wilson started. She noticed she could see Keziah now—the outline of her figure. "The servants will be coming down," she said; "go to your room. It is a wonder they are not down before, but I have been so staggered, I had not thought of it." Keziah fled up the staircase like a creature afraid of the light, and Wilson went to Leonard, who was waking.

It was soon breakfast time. Keziah had dressed

herself nicely, why she could hardly have told, for she felt she was going to hear her sentence.

To her great surprise, on going to the breakfast-room, for it was not Keziah to absent herself, Mr. Rimpler was there before her, and appeared calm, as if nothing had happened. He had a black eye, and a plaster under it, which Keziah did not remember to have seen before, and which Mr. Rimpler blunderingly proceeded to apologise for, saying he had tumbled over something in his room in the dark: he did not attempt to say what.

Keziah felt he was telling her a lie, and instinctively the idea came into her mind that he had had a tussle with Wilson, and she smiled. Strange that human beings are so constituted that, in the moments when they are saddest and most sore pressed, the captive mind releases itself from bondage in spite of all control, and catches eagerly at an opportunity for mirth. So Keziah smiled in the depth of her trouble.

A few minutes later Mr. Hackbit came down. He was much as usual, rude and inattentive, and aggravating. But, beyond this, nothing occurred. Was the storm about to blow over, or was its

breaking only deferred? Could Wilson have been mistaken about Rimpler's having found her out? These questions puzzled her extremely, and she could not help thinking about them in spite of herself.

After breakfast she noticed that Mr. Rimpler made no attempt to have private communication with her husband, and she remarked this to Wilson, and said that he might not know, or, if he did, he might not be going to tell.

"Have you ever seen a cat with a mouse, miss?" was the answer. "She lets it run about, and think itself free, because she can put her foot on it when she likes."

"Well," said Keziah, wearily. "Only if it is to come, I wish it would come quickly."





CHAPTER XX.

JUBAL REVISITS JUMLEY.

THAT morning, when it was nearly dinner-time at the house of Rimmon, Jubal and his uncle David were coming across the Old Park from the station at Jumley.

“What a heathenish place this is!” Jubal remarked to his uncle, looking scornfully around at the wretched tumble-down buildings, the literally black road, and the great mounds of cinders, and ominous-looking holes. “Really I had no idea it was half so bad as this.”

“Ah, Jubal,” said his uncle, “we never can judge a place till we’ve another to compare it with. When I was a little lad, and used to carry your

grandfather's dinner in a basin, tied up in a handkerchief, I should have been ready to slay anyone as had said Jumley wasn't the finest place in the world. No, not that," said David, blushing slightly. "I was always more like running away than slaying anybody. But these mines," he went on, pointing with his walking stick, "weren't worked out then, Jubal, that is, all of 'em weren't. And Joshua, your father, Dorcas, and I, and the dear baby that died, we used to play of a night, at hop-sotch with a piece of coal, in this very place, and we used to run over the pit-banks until it got dark. And you see that house over there, Jubal?" he said, indicating the remains of one; "many's the time I've seen your grandfather washing what he called 'the first coat' off, outside that door. There was always a bench standing there, with a tub on it, ready for him. Your grandmother was a very clean woman, and she couldn't bear to have her place messed up, she said, as soon as it was cleaned."

"Well, uncle," rejoined Jubal, with a high colour in his cheeks, "I mean no offence; but for our future comfort, it may be as well that I should just

say, that I am not particularly proud of having had a grandfather who worked in a coal-pit ; nor am I particularly interested in detailed accounts of his methods of performing a toilet ; nor of games played by my father and aunt Dorcas and you. And if I bring any fellows home with me, as you told me I may, I beg you will not mention this kind of thing. Of course I mean no offence. But fellows are apt to look down on this sort of thing. I don't mean to say my grandfather might not have been a very good man."

"He was a very good man," said his uncle in a low tone. He was taking in with difficulty what he was hearing, and he was wounded. Jubal went on—

"You see, however interesting these accounts may be to members of the family, they cannot be interesting to outsiders."

"But you are not an outsider, Jubal," replied his uncle, in the same grieved tone.

"Still, you see," went on Jubal, "I never knew my grandfather, which is almost equal to not belonging to him. And," he added, taking out a

cigar, and lighting it, at the same time being very careful not to soil his straw-coloured glove, which fitted to a nicety, and was bordered by the whitest of white cuffs, "I can't say that I know a single member of the family that anyone would like to belong to except you." And Jubal glanced through his long lashes, at his uncle's face, to see the effect of his little compliment. He saw only the troubled look. David Rimmon did not care much for compliments, and did not see them readily. But he did notice Jubal's cigar, and said to him—

"Well, Jubal, if I were you, I wouldn't go into your father's house smoking, seeing he dislikes it so."

"I would do a good deal to please you, uncle, but I shall not come here to palaver my father. They are not to kill the fatted calf on my behalf, and hail the prodigal returned. And that is the kind of story he'd tell to all the clerks in the bank, if I humoured his wishes ever so little. If he says I'm penitent, it shall be a direct lie; he shan't have a foundation of excuse for it. And see, uncle," he said, pointing with the hand in which he held his lighted cigar for

a moment, "as you are fond of reminiscences, there is the noble edifice occupied by grandmother during the latter part of her delightful sojourn in this neighbourhood."

David, slow though he was, could take the impression of a tone as quickly as anyone; and he felt that Jubal was making game of the grandmother; and it cut him to the heart. Jubal had known her but as a querulous old woman, it was true; but David had known her as the patient, hard-working mother of the family. He could remember many a time being rocked in her arms at the cottage-door, when he had fallen down, or when some playfellow had been hitting him. He did not put all this in words, but he said with a gentle dignity which became him greatly—

"You asked me, Jubal, not to speak about your grandfather, or our childhood. I now beg of you not to refer to your grandmother, whom you never knew—I repeat it, never knew; for people are not themselves, but someone else, when they are worn down by many griefs."

"Oh, all right, uncle," said Jubal. "I didn't

mean to hurt you. It's all true what you say. I was only joking either."

"That was just it," said David; "you were joking."

They were now passing a ruined engine-house; and Jubal, happening to glance down, saw lying half-hidden under a rusty wheel what appeared to be a bundle of parchment. He took it up, and deliberately put it into his pocket.

"What's that?" asked his uncle.

"A bit of old parchment somebody has thrown away."

"But you have never examined it. It might be some important document. I don't know how you are to know, if you don't examine it."

The fact is that Jubal did know what it was, and did not wish his uncle to know—that is, he knew to a certain extent. He had recognised his father's handwriting upon it; that was enough for him.

Yes; the knife had been to the grinder's, and had got sharpened; but it seemed to have dreams of cutting on its own account. Jubal, having a notion that his uncle was pondering over what he had

picked up, and wishing to change his thoughts, remarked, "What an awful mess this road makes of one's boots and one's trousers!"

"You can turn your trousers up," replied his uncle, looking down at Jubal's. "I turned mine up in the station."

"But you see," returned Jubal, in a lordly fashion, "trouser-bottoms never sit well when they've been turned up. It quite spoils the look."

This kind of talk was beyond David's comprehension. But just as he had always thought that Joshua knew better than he did, so now he thought that Jubal did, at least in most things. The stronger will has often this kind of effect on the weaker one. A strong wind is propelling a boat on a course which threatens disaster: surely the wind cannot be at fault. Why then trouble to alter the sails? The boat may be blown upon the rocks, and smashed to atoms, but what of that? One must submit to the will of Providence.

Jubal pulled his coat a little down, and smoothed a wrinkle. They were in the road where his father lived. In the houses they had to pass, people might

be at the windows—people he had known, and who had known him when he was shabby, and used to go about with a stoop. Boys he used to play marbles with would probably see him. Well, if they did, they should see a gentleman, a fashionable man of the world, Jubal thought, who was not ruined by his father's disinheriting him who was not coming home in sackcloth and ashes to denote his repentance, but in as fashionable a suit as the best Manchester tailor could make for him, and with an air and manner befitting such clothes. It was no beggar coming to his father's house to ask bread. Jubal went as a prince conferring a favour by his presence.

The door was opened. Sarah, who had not seen Jubal for so long, could hardly keep her joy in. She seized him after the manner of the Black Country people, not too gently. "And oh, what a beautiful gentleman he's growed into," she exclaimed. "Bless his handsome face."

It was not until she had exhausted as many epithets as she could think of, that she began to notice that Jubal was not so effusive. In fact, he

was considering whether she had been cooking, and might possibly grease his clothes. He said—

“Oh, so it's you, Sarah. How do you do?” This without a smile, and in a very condescending way : and he was about to pass her, when he turned back, and putting his hand into his pocket, took out half-a-crown. “Here, Sarah,” he said, superiorly, “you lent me half-a-crown once ; here it is. I just remembered it.”

Sarah stared at him in blank amazement, but did not hold out her hand—the hard-working, rough hand that was always so kindly and so ready to labour to the uttermost in loving offices for those she cared for. Jubal dropped the half-crown into her hand, taking great care not to touch her with his glove.

The touch of the cold metal seemed to make Sarah realise the truth. She flung it from her, and flung her apron over her head, and began to sob, while she gasped out—

“No, I will never take it ; no, not if I were starving. To think that I would ha' give all my savings for one shake of his hand.”

Jubal flushed, and drew off one of his tight-fitting gloves. "Dear me," he said, "if it's a shake-hands you want, I don't object to shaking hands;" and he held out a hand white enough to have done a lady credit, but the girl would not take it. How many have had to suffer a like disappointment: how few are prepared for it beforehand. Our brother or our sister goes away from us for years, to come back again, so the world says. The body returns, perhaps, but the same self never. We have said good-bye to that person for ever. Yet those who stay at home think of the absent day and night during the long years, and break their hearts when but a ghost of the lost one comes home. Jubal merely did as the world does; only, Sarah had never thought out the question. She knew that for years she had lightened his life when he was at home and miserable, that she had during the past week prepared all kinds of pleasant surprises for him. And now he treated her like a stranger, and did not even shake hands with her. O simple Sarah! with your good heart, you have made and hidden away in the cupboard an apple-pasty for him; but his tastes have changed, he does not

care for apple-pasty now. *Pâté de foie gras* is more in his line. You may as well leave the pasty in the cupboard where it is. But people in the Black Country don't cry quietly. They do nothing by halves. And Sarah's cry brought Miss Dorcas on the scene, resplendent in a green silk.

"Whatever's this disturbance about?" said that lady. But her eyes falling on her nephew, she was thunderstruck by his appearance. Could this handsome figure that might have come out of a gentleman's fashion-book be her nephew Jubal? It seemed impossible.

"How d'ye do, aunt?" said Jubal, extending the tips of his fingers.

"I think you're too fine for such a house as this," she remarked somewhat cuttingly. "We are not grand enough for such a fine gentleman."

"Ah," said Jubal, with a mock bow. (Sarah had slipped away into the kitchen.) "It is not to enjoy myself I have come, but to see the nakedness of the land. You see," he said, hoping his father was somewhere within hearing, "I've not let my Scripture knowledge rust. But really, aunt, you are

behind the times down here at Jumley ; green isn't in fashion, you know, now—not in Manchester."

This was a very spiteful thrust, and it went home. "You are very rude, indeed," rejoined Dorcas, feeling the glory die out of her green silk nevertheless. "I get the fashion-plates regularly. I know what's in fashion better than you. Well, David," she said, turning abruptly towards her brother ; and a cool family kiss was exchanged.

But where was Mrs. Rimmon all this time ? Will it be believed, she was within hearing, and yet did not come to speak to her son ? She was half-afraid. He did not seem to have received the others well ; what would he think of her ?

Jubal went into the dining-room, not seeing his mother in the dark passage leading into the kitchen. The table was laid for dinner. Jubal looked at everything on the table, while his uncle and his father shook hands. Mr. Rimmon was determined not to be the first to speak to his son, and Jubal decided that he could live without shaking hands with his father ; so there was no sort of greeting between them. Jubal meant to speak to his father, if there

were any occasion, as he would speak to any stranger ; and an occasion came. Jubal sat down on one of the chairs, and got up again directly, looking scornfully at it.

“ You don’t mean to say that you’ve not had the spring of that chair mended yet ? ” he said to his father ; and that was all.

Dinner must come in, and Mrs. Rimmon knew she could delay no longer ; so she timidly entered the room, her face nervously working, and her tears ready to fall.

Jubal kissed her, and held her from him and looked at her, and kissed her again.

“ The farce has begun, has it ! ” said Miss Dorcas, seeing this.

“ No,” said Jubal, standing with his arm round his mother’s waist, “ it has not. The farce will begin when the minister comes in to tea, and you and father act the loving family before him.”

When Keziah entered the room, very pale, and looking paler in her black dress, which she wore for her grandmother, Jubal could hardly believe it was

his sister. The short, crisp, black curls were the same as ever, but the features appeared to be changed; they were more pointed—a change due to thinness.

She went first and kissed her uncle David. He pressed her hand encouragingly, and was much tenderer than ever in his manner towards her. Then Keziah went behind Jubal's chair, and, leaning over, kissed his forehead.

“Oh, Keziah,” exclaimed Jubal, starting, “how frightfully cold your lips are!”

“Are they?” said Keziah, with a wan smile; and she took her place at the table, kissing her mother as she passed her.

The door was now flung open, and Mr. Hackbit swaggered in, and surveyed the company with a leer. He gave a general nod, sat down, and placed his napkin across his knees.

“Well, brother-in-law,” said Jubal, across the table, “your valet has neglected you this morning. Do you know your toilet's rather defective?”

Mr. Hackbit looked severely across at Jubal, and remarked with some asperity that he would rather

wear no clothes at all than be dressed up like a doll, as Jubal was.

Dorcas was sitting next to him. "Your neck-tie's right under your ear," she said, "and you look as if you'd been to bed in your clothes."

"And you," retorted Hackbit, looking critically at his aunt and her get-up, "you look as if you'd just come out from under a glass shade, you do."

"Oh, don't let us have any quarrelling," put in David. "What can be the use of that?"

After dinner, Jubal announced his intention of taking a stroll. The mother would have liked to beg him to remain with her, but how could she dictate to this son who had grown into such a gentleman?

"Yes, show yourself to the inhabitants," was Hackbit's comment. "You'll collect a crowd if you go out."

"You'll collect a bigger crowd than I shall, some day," retorted Jubal. "And really, Hackbit," he said, eying his brother-in-law with a good deal of merriment in his face, "I want to light a cigar, and I believe I could do it at your nose. Have you been

acting the clown, and forgotten to wash your face?" With this home thrust he went out; and Keziah helped to clear the table.

Mr. Rimpler was to come in to tea. He had been invited to dinner, but had made an excuse. When tea-time came he appeared.

There was a marked coldness in Dorcas's manner of receiving Mr. Rimpler, which that gentleman could well account for. He, for his part, appeared to have some fine joke on hand, and laughed to himself without any evident reason several times in succession; and at each laugh Miss Dorcas coloured. He was, however, scrupulous in his attentions to her, and also seemed to take some interest in Jubal, whom he had been led to suppose a very different sort of person.





CHAPTER XXI.

MORE BITTER THAN SWEET.



HIEN at last the evening was over, and it was time to go home, Mr. Rimpler offered to escort Miss Dorcas, which seemed natural enough; but no sooner had he made the proposal than Dorcas said, spitefully, "No, thank you,

Mr. Rimpler, I am no chicken, and am not at all afraid of being in the Old Park myself at night." In spite of this, Rimpler did go with her; and they walked along in silence for a considerable distance.

At last Miss Dorcas said, snappishly, "Are you going to speak, or not, Silas?"

Mr. Rimpler gave a snort, and said in a tone of

some bitterness, "I don't remember the occasion on which I asked you to call me Silas. When I begin to call you Dorcas, you'll have some excuse."

The unquenchable spirit of the spinster rose. "And if I did call you Silas, how many aliens and outcasts would be glad to have somebody to take them by the hand and call them by their Christian name."

"But I happen to be neither an alien nor an outcast. I tell you once for all, you must drop it."

"Oh, Silas, ——"

Mr. Rimpler stopped in the pathway. "If you don't drop it, I won't go another inch with you ; so now you know. And another thing I should like to refer to is your manner of making signs at me before people."

"And you never take any notice when I do," interrupted Miss Dorcas, "no matter how important it may be."

"And I never will notice. I tell you once for all, I won't have it. Do you think I want all the world to believe we have a secret understanding together ? It was disgusting all the evening to see

your eye fixed on me every time I looked your way."

"And this after the way you left me in the Old Park last night!" said Dorcas, growing irate in her turn. They were on the same ground now.

"I'll leave you here again if you don't mind."

"Then you'll leave all that I have to communicate to you."

"I don't care a d—— about your communications."

"You know you do, or you wouldn't have taken so much trouble about it all. Well, at any rate, I got the papers you asked me to get, out of Joshua's safe."

"Where are they?" responded Silas, now interested in a moment, and betrayed into showing it. He had not expected this.

"Well, I waited here, till I was cold and tired, last night, and I lost them; so there."

"You lost them," said Rimpler, horror-struck.

"Yes, and I had them safe enough, when you came first; and you'd have had them if it hadn't been for your going off with that foreigner. I heard

you deny me to him, and laugh when he said that I was no chicken. Men are bad enough for anything."

But Silas had not been listening to her last words. He was absorbed by the thought that the papers were lost. At last he drew a long breath, as if he had forgotten to breathe a few moments, and was making up for it.

"Well," he said, "what a fool I have been."

Dorcas was infinitely relieved to find it was not herself he was calling a fool. "I might know that a woman was sure to make an ass of herself in business," he added. This somewhat spoiled the soothing effect of the last sentence he had uttered.

They had now come to a standstill, both of them.

"Now, I have a warning to give you," said Silas. "It is for your own good, not mine. You must be as silent as the grave upon this business. Do not think of telling anything to spite me, ever; it would be no good. You've no proof of any kind against me, remember; and the moment I hear of your doing anything, then I shall begin. And if I ever should, you will wish you had never been born, mind

that. And from to-night I've done with you ; so don't get trying to see me or to speak to me. And now that we are parting, I'll say another thing to you, that I've been thinking all along ; and that is this. There's no wickedness you'd stop short at, to get your own ends. You don't mind whom you betray. But you can't think for the future that you've done it all in the dark. I've seen my share of bad women ; but I never came across a worse than you, in reality."

Dorcas was literally thunderstruck. She could make no reply. She could not believe she was hearing right. "And is this true, all that you are saying ?" she said at length.

"Yes, it is true," replied Rimpler.

"Then," said she, with a tragic air, "I shall throw myself down one of these old mines."

"Don't," said Rimpler, quietly. "It would be quite lost upon me. I should not try to get you out ; and I should not go in mourning for you." And Miss Dorcas did not fulfil her threat.

"And am I really to say good-bye to you, Silas ?" said Dorcas plaintively. "Am I never to

hear the sound of your voice again, the voice that has grown so dear to me ? ”

“ You’ll hear my voice soon enough, if you interfere with my business. And really I don’t think I ever did meet with such a humbug in my whole life. But I tell you, I can see through it ; don’t try it on with me.”

“ Then I will go home to my desolate hearth,” said Miss Dorcas, still in a tragical vein.

“ Yes, do,” said Rimpler. “ You’d make any hearth desolate ; and you’d turn any paradise into a howling wilderness.”

“ Very well,” returned Dorcas, “ I will leave you ; and the day may come when I can do you a bad turn, and I shall do it, never you fear.”

“ I don’t fear,” was Rimpler’s reply, “ but I knew it before you told me.”

Yet Dorcas did not move off.

“ Look here,” said Rimpler ; “ if you think by waiting you’ll get me to alter my mind, you’re mistaken. I shall go not a step farther with you, and you can go home yourself.”

Dorcas moved away with great bitterness in her

heart. But when she was out of sight, Silas lit match after match, and searched—quite fruitlessly as we know he must—for the missing papers. He scarcely expected to find anything in his search; but he was very angry, and it suited his humour to be searching.

He was not alone, though he imagined himself to be so. Jubal had strolled after Rimpler and his aunt, on pretence of smoking, but in reality hoping to hear what terms they were on, and to find out anything detrimental to either of them. He heard the quarrel, which amused and gratified him. He also felt sure what the subject was. But if he had not been sure, his suspicion would have been confirmed by the search Mr. Rimpler made under his eyes.

Jubal did not wait to see how this search ended. He preferred to get away while still unobserved. When he got home—that is, to his father's house—he found his mother in a violent state of agitation.

“What’s the matter, mother?” he asked.

“Oh, Jubal, somebody has robbed your father.”

“Do you mean broken into the bank, mother?”

“No, the safe, here, in the house. He’s nearly frantic.”

“Was it money?”

“No; papers.”

“Well, they can’t matter much, unless they’re bank notes,” said Jubal.

Jubal swaggered into the room where his father was.

“What is it you’ve lost?” he said in an indifferent tone.

“Papers,” cried Mr. Rimmon, quite forgetful for the moment that he and his son were enemies.

“I suppose they’re not of much consequence,” said Jubal.

“They are of all consequence,” cried his father. “I tell you unless I can gain possession of those papers I’m ruined—ruined—do you hear, Jubal?—ruined.”

“They must be funny kinds of papers, I should think,” said Jubal.

“Jubal,” said David, who was as white as his brother, “is this a time to talk like that?”

"When were they stolen?" Jubal asked his father. "To-day?"

"Oh, no; I've had the key in my possession all day."

"Lock picked, I suppose, then."

"No, the lock has not been picked," said the father, despairingly.

"Then how do you account for it?"

"Yesterday I dropped my key accidentally; it must have been used by some one."

"Well," said Jubal, with mock sympathy, "it isn't a pleasant thing to have lost papers that compromise you. You may never find out where they are; and it's like a sword hanging over your head by a hair, isn't it, father?"

Every word stabbed Mr. Rimmon. Who knew their weight so well as he did? "Oh," he said, turning to his brother, with a touch of very real feeling, "how I wish I'd stuck to my bank, David, and kept everything square."

"I wish thee hadst," replied David, falling into his dialect in his emotion.

"Jubal," went on his father, with such a real

ring in his tone that Jubal was startled, "I've not trained you well, heaven knows."

"Earth knows it, too," put in Jubal.

The father took no notice, but went on in a most solemn tone. "But you are young, and need never come to be what I am. You've often heard me quote Scripture, Jubal?"

"Too often," said Jubal.

"Well, you shall hear some more, Jubal, though it may be the last, and it's the truest in all the Bible. 'The way of transgressors is hard.'"

David was quite overcome, and hid his face in his hands; Jubal felt no kindling of sympathy.

"Don't take any notice of him, uncle," he said contemptuously; "he's only making out."

"Making out!" cried the elder man, in an agonised tone. "That is likely, that is! I meant to set it all right, and to give up the other business." It was the first time the "other business" had ever been alluded to between the brothers. "And now I've no chance. Oh, I wish all my money was sunk in a mine."

Half-an-hour later, when Joshua was alone, he

bitterly regretted having exposed himself in this manner ; and he would have regretted it still more had he known that the son before whom he had committed himself had the missing papers at that very moment in his possession, and gloried in it. Joshua had been a hard tyrant to Jubal when Jubal was a boy, and now that Jubal was independent of him, he showed no disposition to heap coals of fire on his father's head by returning good for evil. Had this view of the case been put to Jubal, he would probably have said, so great was his hatred to his father, that he would have preferred to heap coals of fire under his father's feet and burn him to ashes. The slave makes a terrible slave-driver, when his chance comes. His master may have known limits ; he knows none.

So while Joshua tossed that night upon his pillow, in an agony, for the time being, of remorse and despair, his son lay awake, too, for very joy. He had got his father in his power.





CHAPTER XXII.

DEATH BEFORE DISHONOUR.

THE snow had been falling all the evening ; sometimes slightly, sometimes more thickly. It was falling when the different companies went home from the house of Rimmon. When Thomas Hackbit and Keziah had got outside the house, he said to her—

“ You are a very fair actress, Keziah ; but I can beat you in acting.”

Keziah turned her face towards him instinctively, though she could not see him, not to miss what he should say next.

“ You have kept your eyes open very well, considering you were up all last night. But don’t you

think I have, considering that I was up, too? Should you like to know where I was last night, Keziah?"

"No," she replied, in a stifled manner.

"But I shall tell you, whether you wish to hear or not. I passed the night in my own garden, Keziah."

Keziah could not bear to have it broken to her thus. She would do it herself and have it over the more quickly. The quiet tone in which he was speaking filled her with infinite dread. Of course, he knew everything. Well, there was no help for it.

"You may as well say it at once; you saw us, and you heard everything."

"Yes," he echoed, "I saw you, and I heard everything."

"Then, Thomas," she said, putting both of her hands on his arm, and forcing him to stop, "you heard me refuse to go. That is better than anything I could have told you, if you heard it."

This seemed to lighten her load for the moment. At least he had not to take her word for it; he had heard her himself.

“I know,” she went on with great fervour, “how wrong I have been, I know it myself, if you do not say it; but I at least stopped short, and ——” She continued, beginning to cry bitterly, “I was so miserable.”

Keziah had made a mistake in using this last expression. Hackbit had been in love with her in a certain way, perhaps was so still; and it does not smooth a man’s temper for his wife to tell him, by way of excuse, that she has been led into seeking the company of another man because he, forsooth, has made her miserable. It was therefore with additional bitterness that he next spoke to her.

“Don’t try that on with me, Keziah,” he said, shaking her off. “Nothing you can say will alter my decision.”

Then he had arrived at some decision, Keziah thought, her heart failing her. She did not attempt to imagine what it could be; she knew it must be the worst for her, whatever it was.

“It is not last night alone that you have met that man, Keziah. I know all about it; and I’ve determined that, come what may in consequence—

mark my words, come what may—you shall never enter my house again.”

The full sense of the words could hardly strike Keziah in a moment. Could he mean that she was to have no shelter that night—that she was to be shut out of house and home, like some vile creature who deserved no better?

As she made no reply, he asked her, “Do you understand?”

They had walked on, and were now standing before their own house.

“You cannot mean it,” she said huskily.

“I do mean it,” he said. “Try to enter, and I will throw you back with my own hand.”

“But you won’t separate me from my baby?” she said, with a sob in her voice.

“You care for the baby!” he said, with a hoarse laugh.

Keziah clung to him. “I do, I do,” she cried. “Let me have him, and I will go away without a word.”

“And let him starve with you!” sneered Hack-bit. “But no, you are not going to starve,” he added; “you will know where to go.”

She would not notice this. "He shall not starve: I would not let him starve."

"And so you think I would let him eat that man's bread?" said Hackbit sarcastically.

"Oh, I can't make you believe me, if you won't," said Keziah: "it would not be that man's bread; but he should not starve."

"And in any case," went on Hackbit, "do you think I should let my child starve?"

"But you would let me starve."

"You are different, and you know where to go."

"I'm his mother," pleaded Keziah faintly.

"We've talked enough," was the reply. "Away with you;" and he pushed some money into her hand, a few coins. She flung them from her, and the snow covered them. In a flash, it seemed, he was gone, and the door was shut, and she heard it barred. Excited to frenzy, she felt like ringing the bell violently, and rebelling against this sudden expulsion; and she stood and gazed, she could not have told how long, at the house.

At last she was conscious of some one approaching her: it was Silas Rimpler. She moved away,

and he did not see her. She heard him ring the bell. She heard the door unbolted. It was opened, and a flood of light shot across the snow-covered path.

Should she make a sudden bound, and be within that light and warmth, and beg him on her knees to let her remain with her baby?

No, it could be of no use; nothing could be of any use now.

The door was shut, and again she heard the bolts.

Still she waited, till at last lights shone out from the windows of her husband's and Mr. Rimpler's bedrooms.

Then these lights went out, and all was dark. The snow began to fall faster. Keziah felt she must do something for herself now.

But the only thing that suggested itself was to go round to the back of the house, through the garden gate, and look for the night-nursery light. That was out too.

"They believe I am staying at mother's for the night," she thought. "They little know I am shivering out here."

What a grim satire it seemed. She was standing

on the spot where, last night, she had listened, with so much hidden longing in her heart, to an appeal to leave the place. To-night she could not enter again if she would. She passed out at the garden gate again. She could not stay there, it was clear. Go to her father's she would not. No, she must walk on, as far away as she could, before morning. She would write to her mother.

But the roads were bad, and walking was difficult. When once outside the gate, she had turned and thrown some kisses towards the window where the little Leonard was asleep. "At least he will not ill-treat the child," she thought; and that was something.

She had got a little housekeeping money in her pocket. She could go on a few days till she should get something to do. She trudged patiently along the road, which grew darker. She knew where she was going, and kept her direction; it was to Wolverhampton. She knew of a woman there who kept a registry office for servants. She had got servants for her. She would go to her, and get a temporary lodging while she could plan what to do. The

woman had always seemed kind and pleasant ; and this was the only person Keziah could think of that she would be willing to go to.

It was a long, weary walk, and Keziah had not made much headway, when she was conscious of being followed. She stopped a moment and listened.

No one was following her. Yet as soon as she began to walk again, she heard the footsteps after her.

Some furnaces were lighting up the way ahead of her, now. She must pass the glow ; so must the one who was following her. It is a horrible feeling, that of being followed in the darkness, and only those who have experienced it can know how horrible. Along a Black Country road this is especially true. There is a grimness about the road, the boundaries of which are so often black mounds, or dark, stagnant waters. To be followed on such a road is worse than to be followed on a decent high road with inoffensive hedges on either side. Keziah felt this to the full, in her excited condition. It was one more horror added to the rest. Besides, it is almost a necessity for a Black Country person born and bred to have

some trace of superstition, so called ; and it did alarm Keziah all the more that the footsteps ceased when she listened for them. She walked on bravely, and was getting nearer and nearer to the light of the foundries. But then the clanging of the iron made it almost impossible for her to hear the footsteps. She clung to the hope that she should see who it was when they both passed the light of the foundry.

And now she herself was in the full glare, and her ears were deafened by the noise. A thought struck her. "Perhaps the thing that is following me may wait till I am out of sight before passing ;" and she, who had often traversed the road before, knew by experience that there were miles of dark, deserted road beyond this one light.

Opposite the foundry was a tumble-down cottage, one of many such, deserted and left to ruin when those who had occupied them had migrated. She would hide herself a moment in this place, and perhaps the thing that was following her would pass before her eyes.

Once inside the cottage, she placed herself in the shadow near where a window had been, but where

now not even a frame existed. She could see the road, and she could see the foundry. She moved a little farther, for no particular reason, and something sprang upon her with an unearthly sound. All sensation stopped within her for the moment, and then her heart gave a great thump that nearly shook her. She saw what had startled her, for it was crossing the road now in the light. It was only a homeless cat that had sought shelter from the inclement weather. Still, the fright had increased her nervousness greatly. She tried to keep her attention on the dark road, with a streak of light across it. But somehow her gaze was fascinated by the foundry, where the night-workers moved hither and thither in a terrible glow of light, being covered at times by masses of sparks, and then dragging out from between immense rollers long lengths of red-hot iron, and carrying them quickly, and without any apparent discretion, right among the crowd of other workers, and laying them at the side of others to cool upon the ground. These silent workers, for they were not talking to each other—how could they, for that matter, amidst the hubbub of hammers,

the hissing of streams of water upon red-hot iron, and the roaring of the forges? They seemed to Keziah's excited mind almost like demons preparing for some evil deed.

But now as she looked, something obstructed the view. It was the figure of a man along the road. His face was turned towards the forge, and he seemed puzzled, and stood hesitating. At last, he walked across a black mound that separated the forge from the road, and went towards the great shed under which the men were working. He seemed to be speaking. One man came out of the glare, and he held his ear towards him, and then shook his head and went back.

Keziah felt she must move on now, or be detected. For how did she know that the stranger, whom she believed to be the person who had followed her, might not look next into the ruined cottage? But no, she could not move away. He was crossing the road, in the direct stream of light; and as his back was in the full light, his face was in shadow. She put her hand against some of the brickwork to steady herself, and it came down with

a crash. The stranger paused, and then made his way to the cottage.

One of the bricks had fallen heavily upon her foot. It was extremely painful. Everything seemed to be closing in. The figure entered by the doorway, and came quite near to her ; and then, in what seemed to her an unearthly tone, spoke her name.

If she did not cry out, that did not proceed from any great bravery on her part ; it was from inability. Who has not in a thunderstorm waited with bated breath for the next clap and flash ? and if on a lonely stretch of moor, who has not trembled inwardly in such a storm, as crash has succeeded crash, and glare, utter darkness ? Keziah's life of the last few hours was such a storm as this ; and at this moment her breath was bated for another crash, with possible direful consequences. Someone had said, " Keziah," but the voice was one she did not know.

In what appeared ages afterwards, a hand travelled towards her, and touched her. Then the same strange voice said, " Don't you know me ? I have come to take care of you."

Then the bolt had not descended upon her and struck her. This was her thought at first. But on its heels came another thought. The bolt had descended, and had struck her. She knew who was speaking to her.

“How dare you follow me?” she said. “How can you have the cowardice? And only last night you promised me you would never see me again. You have lied to me; you have lied to me!” she said bitterly, the tears chasing each other rapidly down her cheeks in the darkness.

A groan was the only reply to this.

“Why, do you want me to hate you too?” she cried. “If you loved me, you would care for my reputation.”

“Oh, Keziah,” cried her companion in heart-broken tones, “to think you should ever use such words to me! You have misunderstood me, quite misunderstood me.”

“I have understood you perfectly,” returned Keziah. “It is you who have not understood me,” And she tried to limp away. But the pain in her foot was so great, she was obliged to stop herself.

“Keziah, why won't you believe me? I said I had come to take care of you, as your father might, or your brother; that is my meaning.”

“Yes,” she cried passionately, “like my father, and my brother; you have well spoken. My father and my brother would ruin me for their own ends; so would you, or you would never have asked me to leave my husband's roof last night, and so get me turned out to-night. Yet I was going away, praying for you, and forgiving you. But now you have broken your word and followed me, to take advantage of my misery, what can I say to you? If ever there was a moment when you should have kept yourself far from me, it is now.”

“Keziah, I would die for you.”

“Then why not do a small thing, and keep away from me?”

“Keziah, that is a greater thing.”

“Then be a man and do the greater thing. I have done wrong, too,” she said, weeping afresh, “or it might never have come to this.”

“No, it was all my fault,” said Rupert, gazing with despairing tenderness at her.

“I deserve what has come,” said Keziah.

“Heaven knows, that is not true,” replied Rupert. “It is I, and only I, who have been to blame. Keziah, tell me what to do, and you shall see how I will obey you now.”

“Go back at once to Leamington, if you mean what you say; and show the world that I am not with you. That will be proving your love for me.”

“I will do it,” he answered with a sob. “But you will tell me where you are going? At least you will tell me that?”

“No,” said Keziah sadly; “it is right you should not know that either.”

“What harm could it be for you to tell me where you are?”

“There would be harm.”

“You have some money with you?”

“Yes, I have some money.”

“And will you take just a little from me? You may return it some day, if you like.”

“Do you not understand,” broke out Keziah hotly, “that I can have no dealings with you of any

kind? Go back at once ; you may even now have been seen following me.”

He took off a large scarf that was about his neck. “Let me give you this, Keziah, You are but ill clad.”

“How can you !” she cried despairingly. “Why do you make my way so difficult ? Would you have me found in possession of your scarf ? Where is your common sense ?”

“Oh, God !” cried Rupert, breaking down utterly, and sobbing. “And am I, who love you so, not to be allowed to do the least thing for you, because a cursed villain has robbed you from me, and ill-treated you, and shut his door upon you ?”

“It can do no good to talk of that now,” said Keziah. She was about to pass him. He caught her by the arm, still shaken with sobs, and would not let her pass. She tried to wrench herself free.

“Keziah, I have only one thing to ask you. I know more about the world than you do, Keziah. If you do not want to be suspected, Keziah, go to some friend. You need not tell me whom. If you promise me this one thing, I shall go away contented.

Contented ! No, not that. But it will be more endurable, that is all I can say."

"I will promise you that, then," said Keziah. And she was moving away again.

"Not one word of farewell, Keziah ?" he said.

"Good-bye," she answered, passing on.

He had almost hoped, when he had so far acceded to her wish, that she would have given a different farewell from this cold "good-bye." But her manner was such that he dared not ask for more. The Keziah he loved could never be further from him, he felt, than she was this night.

She was outside now : but these words followed her in a choked whisper, "You will say you forgive me."

"I forgive you," she said in a low voice ; and disappeared in the darkness.

And Elworthy, half beside himself with grief and misgiving, and unable to do anything, watched the spot where her figure had disappeared, until his eyes were strained ; but follow her he would not—rather could not. And when at last he had gazed so long that his eyes, grown weary, drooped their lids,

he slowly turned his head and gazed at the foundry.

“No man has ever been so wretched as I am,” he thought within himself, “so wretched and so powerless.” And while he thought this, the immense hammers came down upon the iron, and flattened it and crushed it. “Oh!” he thought, “if only I could place my head one moment under that hammer, and end it all; it would be so soon over.” He remained long gazing at the glare, and scarcely thinking. All was too much in a tumult within him. At last he became conscious that he must go away. If he were not in Leamington in the morning, people might say he had been with Keziah. They should never say that; and he staggered out of the place, and walked like a drunken man along the road.

It had ceased snowing some time, and the path was very dark. Snow blackens almost as it falls in the Black Country; and it must be deep indeed before it can be like a pure white sheet over the earth. It was not deep now, and was blackened as it had fallen.

At last he struck his foot against something: it

was only a rising footpath, of which there are many in these neighbourhoods, a foot, and even sometimes a yard, above the road. He staggered along this footpath. It seemed to be going down all at once. He felt himself falling, and his next sensation was that water was closing over his head.





CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GREATER BARN.

And he said, . . . "I will pull down my barns, and build greater."



AD Keziah waited before her own house a little longer, she would have seen the lights reappear in the two front bedroom windows; for Mr. Hackbit, having made an effort to go to bed as if nothing were the matter, had found himself quite too excited to sleep. "D—— it," he said to himself, "I'll have that fool Rimpler up, and wet our throistles a bit."

Now Mr. Hackbit was deeper than Rimpler gave him credit for being: though he did let things out sometimes when he was drunk, they never were things that told against himself. To-night he had

driven Keziah forth, and so natural had been his demeanour that no one suspected it. The servants knew she had not come home, but they thought she must be staying at her mother's, and of course they knew better than to ask Mr. Hackbit a question.

Mr. Rimpler, finding Hackbit at home on his return, imagined Keziah to be in the house. He had likewise imagined Hackbit to be ignorant of what had occurred the night before. So when Hackbit rapped sharply at his door, and then thrust his head in, and said, "Get up, Rimpler, I say ; let's have a drink," he merely thought Hackbit had passed an unpleasant day, and meant to make up for it ; and got up directly, very quickly as Hackbit thought, for he did not know Mr. Rimpler was sitting dressed by the window.

When Mr. Rimpler had fumbled about the room a little, he lit his candle, completed his toilet as if it had been morning, and went downstairs. He looked in the dining-room, but found no Mr. Hackbit. He was surprised. He went into the hall and listened ; he heard a movement in the kitchen, and went there.

“I say, what are you doing?” he asked Hackbit, who was prowling about with a candle.

“I am going to get some wood to light a fire in the drawing-room,” adding, with great assumption of grandeur, “We’ll sit in the drawing-room, Rimpler. I’m a rich man, and shall be richer. Why shouldn’t I use the best room I’ve got?”

“All right,” replied Rimpler, amused, “that’s your look-out, you know. Only I shouldn’t have thought you were such a fool as to tell anyone you are rich.”

“You are not the outside world.”

“No; and you’re shrewd enough to know I should guess in any case. That’s it, isn’t it, Hackbit?”

A large fire was soon burning in the drawing-room, what with the unusual quantity of wood and the bellows which Mr. Rimpler plied. Hackbit sat down complacently, with two or three bottles in front of him, also glasses and sugar.

“I say, Rimpler, how should you like to be a partner?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Rimpler, indifferently.

“But I say, Rimpler, by Jove, we are making money, old Rimmon and I. You think you know everything, but we could surprise you a bit. Some people save and save and save, and never enjoy their money. I don’t mean to be like that.” And he poured out a glass of neat brandy, and took a draught without blinking. “What if my father was a collier, I mean to have a place among county gentlemen, — them. Rokesworth Hall is to let, and I mean to take it. I’m getting richer than them all, and hang it, why shouldn’t I live as well? Ah. Rimpler, though they hate me, they shall envy me. If old Josh Rimmon is content to live in that pig-sty, all the better for me. I’ll live for the two of us.” He took another draught of brandy. “And — me, Rimpler,” he went on, “there’s some pleasure in living when you can buy a horse, or what not, that some noble lord would give his head for, just because you’ve the longest purse. By Jove, I’d give any price, if I thought one of them chaps wanted it.”

All this did not arouse the interest and sympathy in Mr. Rimpler which it might have done, had he not known about the missing papers. The man

who knows that the best horse in a race has been drugged and will break down does not show extraordinary acuteness in not betting on him ; so Silas Rimpler did not show astounding acuteness in not backing the House of Rimmon : and throughout Mr. Rimpler's life he had nearly always backed the winner. He rather enjoyed the joke of hearing Hackbit run on, however, and encouraged him to talk.

“Bills of sale are the grandest investments,” said Hackbit, “while it can be kept dark ; and my experience is,” he went on in a cunning tone, “that people who have been sold up have not spirit enough left to go to law with you about it, neither have they the cash,” and he burst into a laugh.

“Do you know, in the beginning, Rimmon wanted to pay me a salary ? I soon taught him a lesson. I've had more than he's had, by Jove. There's a day for every dog, and let every dog have his day.”

“Yes,” Mr. Rimpler assented, “let every dog have his day. My day'll come next.” And he pretended to sip his brandy.

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched," replied Hackbit, who was now getting much the worse for drink.

"I don't usually," retorted Mr. Rimpler. "Neither do I get drunk, and so see double when I'm about counting them, after they're hatched."

This was a little too refined for Hackbit in his present condition, so he took offence.

"Confound you, do you mean to say I'm drunk?"

"Certainly not. Why you've only had half-a-bottle."

It was not long before he had the whole bottle, and his appearance began to alarm Rimpler not a little. He sullenly hung his head down, and looked lowering. At last he intently fixed his eyes on the door of the room. Rimpler involuntarily gazed in the same direction. He could see nothing. "What is it?" he said to Hackbit.

Hackbit pointed a trembling hand towards the door. The hand had grown very bony since he had taken to drinking so furiously, for he had eaten hardly enough to keep body and soul together.

"What is it?" inquired Rimpler again.

“Don’t you see those spiders?”

“I can’t say that I do.”

“Then you must be drunk, or mad. Look, Rimpler,” he said, rising in agitation and trembling all over, “have you ever seen such large spiders? You can’t pretend you don’t see them. Look, they are chasing each other in two lines; and they’ll come down; they are coming down. They’re coming at me, and they’re growing bigger.”

Rimpler became more and more alarmed. Hack-bit clutched at the tablecloth, and tried to get on to the table: but he could not; and the tablecloth came off, and the bottles crashed on to the floor.

“Oh,” he cried, shaking till the very floor shook, “the cloth’s full of them too. See how they spread their legs and come out. Oh, let me get out of here,” he screamed frantically. “The walls are covered with them. Are you a devil that you won’t help me?”

And with one more effort to escape from the room, he fell face downwards upon the ground.

We will spare our readers the horrors of the scene which followed. Joshua and David Rimmon

both came, at Rimpler's request ; and by the doctor's suggestion, Mr. Saltring was telegraphed for. He arrived about eleven o'clock in the morning, and with him Dr. Towers. He had brought this doctor on his own responsibility, having such great faith in him ; and he took him upstairs without any ceremony.

Mr. Rimmon was seated in a chair, looking the picture of misery ; Hackbit was sleeping now, and breathing very heavily. Dr. Towers advanced to the bedside and lifted his eyelid, and turned and looked about the room, but said nothing.

"He'll get better now," said Mr. Rimmon hoarsely ; "he's gone to sleep. Oh, what a night we've had."

"He'll never wake again," replied Dr. Towers quietly. "I have seen cases like this before. It is a possible ending to *delirium tremens*. They sleep to death. I can do nothing for him ; so I had better get back."

"Wait a bit," said Mr. Saltring. "I want you to witness something." He was ashy white. He walked towards the bed. He laid one hand upon

the man who was sleeping his last sleep, and raised the other above his head, and looked upwards.

"I call God to witness," he said, "that I will never sell one drop of any intoxicating liquor again. And I will rid myself of any property I now possess that is the result of the sale of drink."

His raised hand fell by his side, and he faced round and looked at the astonished Joshua and Towers.

"There is no evil so great in the wide world as drink. Can it matter whether the poor wretch drinks it at your counter or carries his bottle home? The end is the same."

He looked upwards again.

"I pray the God of pity to forgive me for the great wrong I have done the human race, for ever having sold or even given away a drop of this poison of souls. Reparation there can be none. The evil is done." And Mr. Saltring covered his face with his hands.

Dr. Towers placed his arm round Mr. Saltring's neck, and said soothingly, "My good friend, God judges us by the motives. Could you, who have the

best heart in the world, have ever meant to ruin any one ? ”

“Remember the proverb, doctor,” returned Mr. Saltring, without taking his hands from his face. “‘Evil is wrought by want of thought as well as want of heart.’ This has brought it home to me, brought it home to me. Within the last twelve months,” he said, raising his white face and looking at the doctor, “cases of spirits have left my shop enough to bring this”—and he indicated with his hand without looking towards the bed—“to I fear to say how many homes. Come, doctor, let us go away. I should like to have seen Keziah, but I can’t face her. If no one had sold the brandy, he couldn’t have bought it, and he couldn’t have drunk it.”

“He didn’t buy the brandy of you, at any rate,” said Joshua Rimmon, rousing himself to speak.

“That makes no difference,” replied Mr. Saltring. “Come, doctor, let us go.”

But while he spoke, all three noticed that the sound from the bed had ceased. Towers looked a moment, and answered Mr. Rimmon’s look. “He’s gone, poor fellow,” he said.



CHAPTER XXIV.

TOM TOWERS GOES UP FOR HIS LAST EXAMINATION.



It was about the middle of January. Thomas Hackbit lay in Jumley cemetery; and in the windows of his house was a notice, "To Let."

No one had made any search for Keziah. She was missing, and Elworthy was missing. The facts seemed to explain themselves. The house of Rimmon was disgraced.

Mr. Rimpler had been engaged by Mr. Rimmon, and was now residing in his house. The baby was there, too; and Wilson had come to nurse him, at Mr. Rimmon's request. The other servants had been dismissed. Mr. Hackbit had left no will, as is often

the case with those whose business it is to make wills.

During the last few weeks Mrs. Rimmon had aged visibly, and seemed so near breaking up that her infirm state formed a principal reason for Mr. Rimmon's engaging Wilson. Mr. Rimmon's hair had grown very grey, and he walked with a slower step, with his head bent forward, and his shoulders stooping.

But where was Keziah?

It was growing dark one evening when a ghost of her former self—yes, a ghost even of her changed self—entered the gate of The Hollies at Bowdon. Maud had been watching at the window and saw her approach, and flew to open the door. Keziah fell into her arms, crying hysterically, "I have come, Maud, like a beggar, to beg shelter. I have no pride left now, Maud."

Maud half carried, half led her into her favourite sitting-room, cooing over her and calling her her lost darling, her own darling, and her own Kizzy. In an incredibly short time refreshment was brought, and the poor wanderer was fed and warmed. Maud,

flitting hither and thither, swift as in the old days, carried most of the things with her own hands, and only tended, and forbore to question her old friend.

When Keziah had eaten, and was warm, her head drooped upon her breast, and she fell asleep. Maud looked at the head. Where were all the short curls gone? The hair was shorn, quite close to her head. And her cheeks, how sunken they were! Maud placed herself so that the head might rest against her, and caressed it tenderly with her white fingers, and dropped scalding tears upon it, and remained cramped in one position for nearly two hours, rather than wake her darling. Then Keziah opened her large startled eyes, and said pleadingly and quickly—

“Look, I will tell you something. Don’t send me out just yet. I have nowhere to go to.” Then she recollected herself, and said, “Oh, I was dreaming. I thought I was back in the hospital again. Oh, Maud,” she cried, flinging her arms about her friend’s neck, “how glad I am it is true I am here.”

Maud answered only by her caresses.

Then Keziah drew her head back, and looked

into her friend's eyes inquiringly. "Do you know?" she asked. "Have you heard?"

"Dearest Kizzy," replied Maud, "if I have heard, and if I know, I do not reproach you."

"Reproach me?" said Keziah, looking puzzled. "Well, yes, I did provoke him; but I am repentant now, Maud; I will go back to him and beg his forgiveness."

Was it possible that Keziah did not know that her husband was dead? It seemed so. She had been in a hospital, it appeared from her conversation. She might know nothing.

"Kizzy," she said, taking the wan face between her hands—the face that had nothing to recommend it now but its pathos—"Kizzy, you will never go back to your husband."

Keziah started, not at the words she had heard, but at the tone. She looked for more, and did not speak.

"Kizzy, my own love, you are free; your husband is dead."

Keziah flung herself upon the couch, and sobbed hysterically. "Oh, that I had been a better wife to

him," she cried. "Oh, that I had been a better wife to him. It might never have ended so." And she sobbed aloud.

Maud knelt by Keziah, and laid her head beside hers, and wept with her. She was weeping because she believed her friend had fallen.

"Kizzy," she said in her ear, "at least if you did go away with him, you have left him now."

Keziah started up at the words, and looked her friend in the face. "I—go away with him, Maud! Who dares to say it?"

Maud only cried, "Thank God! it is not true."

"True, Maud!" said Keziah. "No: I have sunk low, but not so low as that."

"Oh, Kizzy, forgive me for having believed it," said Maud, humbly. "But you see it looked so much like it, that you and he should both disappear."

"He disappear!" exclaimed Keziah, affrightedly. "Is he not in Leamington then?"

"No, he has never been heard of since that night. Your brother Jubal came in here and told me all about it."

Keziah looked very quietly into the fire. And

then, as if suddenly recollecting, said, "Where is your husband, Maud?"

"He is in London, Kizzy, being examined. We will not talk of him, if you don't mind. And now, Kizzy, had not you better go to bed? I don't think you should talk any more to-night."

"But I must know one thing more. Of course, my baby has gone to father's?"

"Yes, and Wilson is there with it."

A beautiful smile broke over Keziah's face, as she heard this, and she said contentedly, "Then I think I will go to bed, Maud."

It must have been about three o'clock in the morning, when both Maud and Keziah awoke with a start. They heard a fall and a terrible crash.

"Whatever can it be?" said Maud; and she flung on her dressing-gown and went out. But though she searched the house all through, she found nothing wrong, nothing broken, nothing displaced, nothing of any kind to account for the noise. Still the sound had been so loud and of so startling a character, that neither of them could sleep again, so they kept their light burning and talked. Keziah

related to her friend how she had wandered along the road to Wolverhampton in the night time, and then how a break came, and she could remember nothing until she awoke in one of the wards of the Wolverhampton Hospital; and she was told she had had a fever. When she was well enough to go out, they had given her the money they had found in her clothes, and she had come straight to Manchester.

Then about dawn, Keziah fell asleep again; and Maud remained awake. The sound she had heard had been exactly like the smashing of the hall-lamp by something falling upon it. When daylight came, she was glad indeed to end a night of wondering and silence.

She was dressing herself when a postman's knock came to the door.

"How early the post is this morning," she thought.

It was not a letter; it was a telegram. She swayed and fell, crying, in a suffocating voice, "My darling's dead, he's dead."

Keziah, weak though she was, gained her side, picked up and read the telegram.

Yes, he was dead.

Maud lost her consciousness entirely. And when at last she came to herself, it was only to cry, "He is dead! and now he will never learn to love me again." She became so ill that a servant was despatched for a doctor. He ordered what is always ordered in such cases, and can never be obtained—rest. And the day wore on, and Keziah and Maud wept in company. They were both widows now.

The next morning a letter of particulars came. Tom Towers had passed his examination, and had gone to his hotel, and right up to his room, which was at the top. And by accident, it was believed, he had fallen over the banisters from the top to the bottom of that great building, smashing the hall lamp by his fall.

Inside was a letter addressed, in his handwriting, to his wife. "Read it, Kizzy," she said, "for I cannot." Kizzy opened it and read, with dilated eyes and horror in her face:—

I have passed my examination, Maud, my own much-loved wife; and shall end it all to-night. Shall I tell you why? I can bear life no longer. It was I who committed

the murder poor Elworthy was accused of. I did not mean to do it, I swear I did not. I ought, perhaps, to have died and never told you. But you might hear of it some way. You would bear it better coming from me. The money I have had from you at different times has been to purchase the silence of a man who saw me commit the deed.

And now, with my last words, I beg you to forgive me, and to believe how well I have loved you. The man will trouble you no more when I am gone. You will, I know, believe I did not mean to do it. And now I enter on another world, where we may yet meet, if God pardons me, as I am sure you will.

YOUR HEARTBROKEN HUSBAND.

Keziah did not show this letter to Maud for a day or two ; not till a verdict had been given, at the inquest, of "Accidental death, due to over-excitement from examination."

Maud never saw his body, and never even saw the coffin. She felt it would have killed her. He was buried in Manchester, in the cemetery where she had so often walked.

END OF VOL. II.

